ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

APRIL 14

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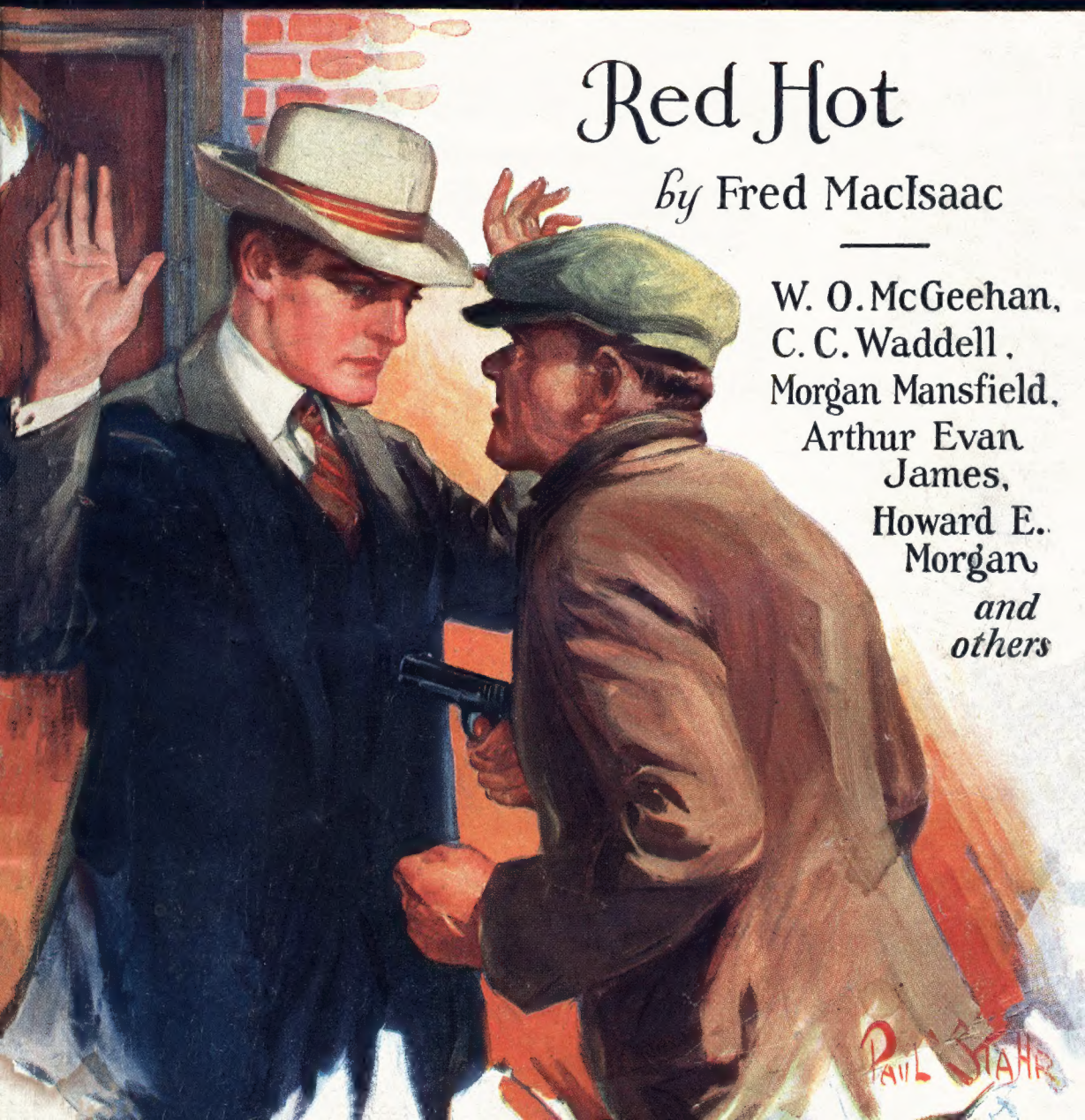

Red Hot

by Fred MacIsaac

W. O. McGeehan,
C. C. Waddell,
Morgan Mansfield,
Arthur Evan James,
Howard E. Morgan
and others

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ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 194 SATURDAY, APRIL 14, 1928 NUMBER 2

Red Hot

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "Coast of Blue," "Desperate Chances," etc.

In which the author shows that you'll have an exciting time if you try to keep a good man down

CHAPTER I.

REGARDING HONESTY.

LESTER LUCUS was humming a tune. At first he hummed it under his breath, then he gained confidence, put some heart in his work so that the melody was recognizable, and finally began to mumble the words.

Nora Meagher, the stenographer, ceased typing to listen, then giggled; and Lester stopped singing.

"And what's the matter with you, Gwendoline?" he demanded.

"That tune," she tittered. "I used to sing it in school. If I am not mistaken— Would you mind reciting the words?"

"Lady, you make me proud:

"Let precious truth and honesty
Attend thee all thy days
And turn not thou a finger's breadth
From the Lord's most holy ways."

"Umm. That's what I thought it was."

"And why should it move you to unseemly mirth?"

Nora shot him a mocking smile.

"The song's all right, but to have you sing it—well, it's rather incongruous."

Mr. Lucus rose from his chair and approached, rested his six feet upon the edge of the girl's typewriter desk, and regarded her sternly.

"Provided you know what incongruous means, Miss Meagher, you have delivered a dirty dig. But how could one so young and beautiful, one so unacquainted with four-syllable words, one whose spelling is so bizarre, one who ought to be fired for general incompetency, know the meaning of such a mouth-filler?"

Nora regarded him saucily.

"I know what it means, and I can spell it. So there, Mr. Lucus."

"Prisoner refuses to plead innocent. All right. What makes you think I am dishonest?"

She pointed to a pile of letters.

Mr. Lucus lifted bushy, reddish eyebrows.

"The sales letters? Miss Meagher, compared to the line of chatter in an ordinary sales letter— Say, did you ever hear of Warren Hastings?"

"Yes. He was an English general, or something."

"Something is right. He was the Governor of India about a hundred and twenty-five years ago. He was a great old boy. Swiped everything in India that wasn't nailed down. Even took the gold filling from the teeth of the Indian rajahs, and it required about six ships to carry home his swag.

"When he landed in England they immediately put him on trial for graft, robbery, murder, arson, and everything else they could think of. Do you know what Warren Hastings said?"

"Good morning, judge?"

"Nix." Lucus drew himself up and assumed a manner of great dignity. He opened his arms in an eloquent gesture. "'Gentlemen, when I consider my opportunities, I marvel at my moderation.'"

"Just another crook," observed Nora.

"Now, when I think what I might have put in those sales letters, I marvel at my self-restraint and adherence to truth. I'm so honest that I wouldn't steal a kiss—that's Lester Lucus. If Diogenes ever met me, he would blow out his lantern."

"You hate yourself," said Miss Meagher. "A person who bought a lot on what you say in this letter could have you put in jail for misrepresentation."

"No, marm. Old Davenport is liable to call me for not making it strong enough. Fact is, Nora, you have got to sort of—er—exaggerate to sell, but the buyer always allows for that and discounts it. If I told the exact truth, he would take twenty-five per cent of that off for sales-bull, and then he would get a bad opinion of Laguna-by-the Sea."

"'Only thirty miles and forty minutes from New York,'" she sniffed.

"By airplane, precious, as the crow flies."

"'Within two or three minutes of some of the wealthiest homes.'"

"By automobile, if you exceed the speed limit."

"'Superb view of Long Island Sound.'"

"When they cut Big Horn Mountain away."

"'Going like hot cakes.'"

"How do I know how fast hot cakes go? Maybe they don't go at all."

"'Three-quarters of the development already allotted.'"

"Well, so it is. All we got to do is tell the fellows we allotted it to."

"'Healthy as the Adirondacks. Ideal for young children.'"

"When the swamps are drained, it will be just as healthy as the Rocky Mountains."

"And when will that be?"

"She asks me riddles," he stated to the ceiling. "I'm surprised a lady with your scruples could possibly type such letters."

"I have to earn my living," Nora said soberly.

"And I'm no lily of the field. I've got to get mine. How are we going to be married if I don't make good money?"

"Upon my word," remarked Nora, "we are not going to get married. There are eleven reasons why I would not marry you, but one will do."

"Spill number one."

"God Almighty hates a liar."

Lester looked hurt.

"Meaning me? Listen, you beautiful Hibernian, I never told a lie in my life, except in the way of business, and those are only fibs, business necessity. Honesty is my policy, truth my fetish, and my integrity will be the death of me.

"Now, you lap a lot of postage stamps and stick them on those sales letters; then get out your tool kit and plaster the map of Ireland in preparation for getting tooken to dinner by Honest Lester Lucus."

"Yes?" said Nora in a tone which meant: "Nothing of the kind."

"Yes, marm. Meanwhile, I shall enter the lair of William Q. Davenport, and tell him that mamma's only son needs a lift in salary. In case you would like to know how increases in honorariums are secured, listen at the keyhole, beloved."

With this, Mr. Lucus stalked away, head up, shoulders squared, with the measured tread of a grenadier, but as he neared the fatal door his step grew slower, his manner less Napoleonic. A giggle from the rear recalled him to the situation, and he opened the door without knocking and entered.

Nora Meagher opened her handbag and removed a mirror, a small, round enameled box, and a lipstick. A girl has a hard time refraining from making up under ordinary conditions, but when some one has suggested it, she simply cannot resist the notion.

Just the same, she was not going out to dinner with Lester Lucus. She did not approve of Mr. Lucus. He was not serious, and he was an awful liar. No girl could depend upon a man like that.

The face that Nora had gazed at in the mirror, and which Lester had described as "the map of Ireland," was a pretty nice face. Ireland, as a matter of fact, is a very beautiful country. Nora had eyes of Irish blue, that coal-black hair and blond skin which is combined only in the land described by an enthusiastic poet as "a little bit of heaven."

Her nose was small, and might have been referred to either as retroussé or pug, depending upon the vocabulary of the describer, and there were three or four freckles on the bridge of it that she tried to smother with powder. Her hair was bobbed; she admired its inky gloss and its inky shade, then frowned when she remembered what Lester had said.

"The last time I saw hair like that it was on a horse, a horse called Black Beauty." Lester's technique had a lot of holes in it.

Her cheeks were pink, but she put some rouge on them to make them pinker, and she did some fancy work upon a mouth that didn't require any; such ripe, red lips were as inviting as red apples, and the snowy, tiny, even teeth were good enough for a tooth-paste ad.

The chin was small, round, and had a dimple in it. Another dimple appeared in her left cheek when she smiled.

She couldn't see her figure, but we can. She was a small girl and slender, but it was not a skinny figure, no indeed; and as for the legs from ankle to knee—and the knees were in full view as she sat with crossed legs—take it from the author that Nora Meagher was the kind of a girl who

ought not to be allowed to work for her living.

The place for her kind of women is in the home, and there were three or four young men earnestly endeavoring to incarcerate her there; the only one who wasn't as much in earnest as he might have been was Lester Lucus.

Bang! It was the door to Mr. Davenport's office.

Nobody ever slammed Mr. Davenport's door, and Nora ceased her art work to discover the cause of the sacrilege. Lester Lucus was back. The young man was breathing deeply; there was an angry look in his gray eyes, even his red hair seemed to be bristling like the quills of a hedgehog, and his face was flushed.

"The old crocodile!" he exclaimed. "The crumby old spider! Nora, alongside of Davenport a cockroach is a noble insect."

A look of concern painted itself upon the already painted face of the sunbeam of the Davenport Realty Company's office.

"Lester!" she exclaimed. "You didn't get thrown down?"

Lester shook his flaxen locks; if they were not more red than flaxen, or not long enough to shake, it is a pretty figure of speech.

"Down," he remarked, "and out."

"Fired?"

"Even so, girl of my dreams. Now ask me why I have been fired."

"Well, why?"

"Because of my unconscionable rectitude. Because my conscience did not permit me to tell that old German I took out to Laguna-by-the-Sea that the piece of swamp I showed him had no quicksands in it. Because my sales letters lack force—get that, Cassandra. The very letters for which you accused me of mendacity and moral turpitude—"

"For Heaven's sake," pleaded Nora, "forget you went to college, and talk American."

"Anyway, I'm chucked," he grinned. "Thrown out into the snow without the marriage certificate, minus the diamonds, and with a blot upon my escutcheon."

"What's an es—es— What you said?"

"Danged if I know. Something the old crusaders carried, a shield, or a clean handkerchief. If they got mud on it they were fired out of the Crusaders' Amalgamated Association for Mutual Welfare and Protection."

Nora's eloquent eyes exhibited distress.

"I'm awfully sorry, Les," she said. "You're cuckoo, but I do like you. If you went back and asked to stay on at the old salary, don't you think he'd let you?"

Lester Lucus drew himself up to his full height and assumed a manner of hauteur.

"Can you imagine me lowering myself by going back? Do I look like a groveler? Can you see me lapping the polish off the boots of that crusty old persimmon?"

"Have you got any money?" she asked practically.

"Not much, but I can always rob a bank. Between brigandage and selling lots in Laguna-by-the-Sea—what's the difference?"

"One way you go to jail, and the other way you keep out of it—if you are lucky. I hope what I said isn't responsible for this."

"Oh, no, Nora. I can't live on what he pays me, and I intended to tackle him for a raise anyway. Tell papa—now that I can't see you in the office any more, will you tip a fellow off where you park, where you play the piano, where you do your nightly necking?"

"If you mean where I live, I am stopping with my aunt at 377 West Two Hundred and Eightieth Street."

"Holy Moses—that's a test of a man's devotion. Nearly halfway to Albany."

"Suit yourself," replied Nora indifferently.

"Oh, I can make it. Look at what Lindbergh did, and Peary, and all those explorers. Sure, I'll do you the honor of calling on you when I have located the right kind of a job. Till then, Rose of Shannon, fare thee well!"

When he had departed, Nora sighed.

"The poor nut," she murmured; but there is a way of saying "the poor nut" which is not insulting; Nora sort of cooed the expression, and there was a tender look in her eyes.

After all, she was Irish, and to an Irish girl there is something sweet and appealing about a good-looking young man who doesn't know enough to be allowed outside the sheltering walls of a lunatic asylum.

CHAPTER II.

"MAN WANTS LITTLE HERE BELOW."

PASSING on to the next platform, ladies and gentlemen, we have the honor of introducing to you Mr. Walter Downing, who is going to play an important rôle in this drama. Mr. Downing, at the moment of illumination by the flash light of the author, was eating a banana.

To a casual observer it must be admitted that he resembled a bum. He sat upon a bench in Riverside Drive, wearing a suit of clothes which looked as if he slept in them, and not only he but others before him had slept in them.

No razor had touched his chin for lo! these many weeks, and a gray stubble three-quarters of an inch long gave the effect of a beard—in fact, it was a beard.

He was the kind of man the big interests—the Gillette interests, for instance—would describe as an undesirable citizen. His shirt was dirty, and if his collar was clean it was because it was made of a substance which whitens and shines if you rub it with your coat sleeve after wetting it with your tongue—a celluloid collar, to speak plainly.

His shoes had holes in the soles, and the uppers were holding on by a few shreds, but they would do until the next time one of the big apartment houses put the barrels of rubbish out on the sidewalk with an assortment of discarded footgear.

Mr. Downing sat alone on the bench, although other benches were crowded, because there was something about him that prevented congestion in his neighborhood. He looked like an elderly vagabond, and in a regular town the sheriff would have locked him up as a vagrant, but if New York locked up the vagrants the tea dances and night clubs would be almost empty.

Despite his lowly lot, the old man was happy, and he sang between bites of banana. It was the burden of his song which attracted the attention of another knight of leisure who was trudging along the pathway. Downing was humming:

> "Let precious truth and honesty
> Attend thee all thy days
> And turn not thou a finger's breadth
> From the Lord's most holy ways."

Lester stopped short, regarded the songbird, and smiled broadly.

"If those are your sentiments, they haven't got you much," he observed.

Mr. Downing smiled in friendly fashion, revealing that he had lost a couple of important front teeth.

"What do you mean, much?" he demanded. "I'm all right. I just had my dinner and I got the price of a bed in my pocket. What more does a man want?"

Lester considered. "I should say a suit of clothes, a pair of shoes, a bath, a shave, and a dentist would do you a lot of good."

"Are you going to supply them?" demanded Mr. Downing.

"Not on your life. I have troubles

of my own without playing good Samaritan to hoboes."

"There you are," said the tramp. "You got troubles. I got none. Probably you're going home to a wife who will bawl you out and hand you a lot of bills for sable coats and diamond tiaras. I haven't got anything to worry me."

"I'm not married," replied Lester, "so that's a bad guess. And I'm not in the sables and diamonds class anyway. But I have plenty to worry me."

He sat on the bench a couple of feet from Mr. Downing, which was close enough, considering.

"There you are," said the tramp, who hurled his banana peel at a squirrel which had just poked his head around a tree trunk. "You got worries."

"Lost my job," admitted Lester.

The tramp looked sapient. "The world is made up of people that slave at desks, shut up indoors eight hours a day, for enough to meet their rent, and give them a suit of clothes and something to eat.

"Mister, I'm sixty-two years old, and I ain't done a bit of work for twenty-five years. I wouldn't know what a five-dollar bill looks like, but I always manage to get something to eat, and I been pinched for a lot of things but never for going around naked. Which of us has got the most sense?"

"I bet you've spent a lot of those twenty-five years in jail."

Mr. Downing nodded assent. "Sure. Jail is all right. They give you food and clothes, and you don't have much to do. I always get myself sent up when the cold weather comes."

"You don't mean it."

"You bet I do. The jails are steam-heated, the food is getting better all the time, they have concerts and motion picture shows. Too much bathing; that's all I kick about."

"You're a queer old rooster. Haven't you any self-respect?" demanded the young man.

"Just as much as you got, feller. Here's the idea. People work because they're afraid they'll starve to death, and if nobody worked that would happen all right. If everybody was a millionaire and nobody worked because they had so much money, the world would starve to death just the same.

"But so long as only a few of us are tramps, you working classes support us. Nobody ever starves to death unless they are so foolish they don't let on they are broke. Society takes care of us bums a lot better than it does most of the busy bees."

Lester gazed at him in mingled amusement and admiration. "Upon my word, old man, there is a lot in what you say. If you don't care about good clothes and French cooking; if you don't want a wife and children, and you're not ashamed to admit that you are a hobo, the world presents you a living of a sort."

"That's it. Look at all these people around here. Look at you. All scrambling for a skinny living and trying to save a few dollars to keep out of the poorhouse.

"What's the matter with the poorhouse? Pretty good food, a clean bed, a home for the rest of your life, and no work to do. In another four or five years I'll apply for admission into some poorhouse, and end my days in comfort."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You talk like a man who had some education."

"Young feller," said the ancient, "I was a college graduate in the days when only rich men's sons went to college. I started in life at the top of the ladder. I went in the only way a man in my position could go, downward."

He smiled contentedly as he spoke, and Lester regarded him curiously.

"But you must have something to regret. A man with your chances cannot possibly be satisfied to die a tramp."

"Years ago I used to get sore at the world, but not no more. I'm the only person in this city of New York to-

night that hasn't got a care in the world, except other tramps like myself. By the way, I could use a half a dollar if you're flush."

Lester got up almost reluctantly from the bench. "Here's your fifty cents," he said. "I don't know but it's worth more, this philosophy of yours. What are you going to do with it, buy a drink?"

"No," sniffed Mr. Downing. "You can't get any good beer, and I never liked the hard stuff. I'll just keep it for emergencies. Some poor slob will give me a quarter or a half to-morrow, and all I need is fifty or sixty cents a day in the summer time.

"When the weather is very warm, I sleep in the park, and all I eat is fruit and a glass of milk now and then. A fellow my age has got to be careful of his stomach."

"Of course. You can't afford to get sick."

"Don't fool yourself," replied the tramp. "When I get sick I get taken to a nice hospital and the best doctors in New York take care of me, fellows you couldn't afford to pay. Let me tell you something, young man; I'd rather be a charity patient than a paying one.

"About twenty years ago a big German doctor invented a cure for an incurable blood disease. All the American doctors were afraid of it; so they only used it on charity patients, and kept on treating those that could afford to pay in the old way. They kept it up for five or ten years. Well, all the charity patients got well and the well-to-do patients died."

"Yes? Just the same these experiments kill a lot of you."

"Maybe. There was a French poet named Lamartine that said, 'What's life but a prelude to death.' I should worry if I croak."

"I hope you live long and prosper," laughed Lester Lucus as he moved away. Lester had never heard of Lamartine, and he was not aware that the line just quoted by the college-graduate tramp had been the inspiration of the sublime tone poem "Les Preludes" by Franz Liszt. Lester was not musical, unless an appreciation of jazz is an indication of a musical soul.

As he walked up Riverside Drive toward his lodgings, he chuckled now and then at the shrewdness of the old wretch. It was perfectly true that a man who can reduce his desires to their lowest terms might exist in the modern world without labor, supported by those who despise him yet will not permit him to perish.

However, Lester wanted large quantities of things from life. He was under thirty, and the pleasures of the city appealed to him strongly. He liked the society of women, and nowadays one cannot have female companionship without paying high for the privilege.

He required decent living conditions, not luxury but solid comfort, and he regarded food, not as a means to support life, but as one of the joys of life.

The theaters tempted him, the night clubs were not without attraction, he wanted to own a large shiny automobile and speed about the country; he would like to see Europe and China and Egypt—oh, the world was full of things he wanted to see and do, and he had to have money, much money.

Lester Lucus was a cheerful soul most of the time; he was bubbling over with fun, he had a strong sense of humor, and a knack of throwing himself at whatever had to be done with enthusiasm.

For a time he had managed to convince himself that Laguna-by-the-Sea was a first-class investment and he was doing a favor to anybody he could induce to purchase a lot in that development. Six or seven years of experience in various lines of business had given him a surface cynicism which enabled him to salve his conscience when he was forced to indulge in something approaching sharp practice.

On all sides of him he saw men succeeding whose principles he knew to be elastic, while those who practiced sterling honesty seemed doomed to drudgery. Lester had considered honesty merely as a policy.

While he would not steal or cheat, he felt that a business man had to make compromises with his conscience. "Dog eats Dog" was the way he put it to himself. While he tried heartily to be a dog-eater himself, for some reason or other he didn't like dog-meat.

He had lasted with the Laguna Development a little less than three months, and this was the tenth job he had held in six and a half years since graduating from Yale University.

Lester could explain his failure to catch on to his own satisfaction, too. A fellow went to college as much to make valuable acquaintances as to study. If he got into the right society, roomed with the proper sort of classmate, went around with the really important crowd, he acquired a lot of friends who took care of him after graduation.

He knew of half a dozen comparatively poor men whose chums were the sons of captains of industry, and who had stepped into nice berths the day after they got their diplomas.

Unfortunately Lester was the son of a widowed mother who was barely able to pay his tuition fees, and he was forced to support himself while at college by waiting on table, shoveling snow, fixing furnaces, and tending gardens.

The business of earning his daily bread occupied all his time, and he had to pass up athletics where distinction awaited him, and in the end he had left college without friends of consequence; just a few drudges like himself. It had not soured his disposition; nothing could do that, but it explained to him why he had not got along.

Bluff, cheerful fellows like Lester are rarely introspective, and he had excused himself for not doing better to his own satisfaction until he had gone to work for old Davenport and made the acquaintance of Nora Meagher.

There was a girl who appealed to Lester; pretty, witty, dainty, and delectable, Irish as the shamrock, fun-loving; a girl who ought to be a marvelous playmate. The day he had entered the office Lester Lucus had assured himself that Nora was going to bring sunshine into his life, but for a reason unknown to him Nora had failed to respond to his line.

Nora had a pretty wit, and a tongue which bit like an adder, and Lester's armor of self-esteem was not long impenetrable. He had always been able to amuse the girls in the various offices in which he sojourned, but Nora laughed at him, not with him.

His jauntiness seemed to irritate her, his ebulliency exasperated her, and his assurance impressed her not at all. It was part of her job to take dictation from him, and her manner was not in the least respectful; efforts at dignity upon his part provoked giggles, and when he unbent and endeavored to establish social relations she repulsed him almost rudely.

Nora was a high school graduate, a very competent stenographer, and her age was twenty. She had never been kind to him until the moment when he found himself discharged; and her willingness to see more of him, her frank gift of her home address, which she had hitherto refused to divulge, had touched him. He vowed he was going to see more of Nora even if he no longer worked for old Davenport.

Lester let himself into his room and threw himself into an overstuffed chair, hooking with his toe another chair, and drawing it close so that he might put his feet on it.

"I've wasted my time long enough," he declared aloud. "Now I've got to get into something and make real money."

He regarded the other chair expectantly, but it said nothing.

"Here is a city of seven million people," he declaimed. "About six million, nine hundred thousand are saps, just a lot of wage slaves working for less than a living wage, with not half so much sense as that old bum I talked to in the park.

"But a hundred thousand of them are intelligent; wise boys who have ideas and know how to get the money. Just because they use their heads to think with they have all the others working for them and rolling up the dough for them.

"The question before the house is whether I am one of the hundred thousand men of vision, or just a sap like the mob. I think I'm intelligent, I have a good education; half the successful men never heard of the binomial theorem; I have got brains, force, magnetism, ingenuity, personality, and everything required to win out, only I'm a flop. Why?"

He put the question to himself and cogitated; finally he shook his head.

"You can search me. I suppose a fellow needs capital; only most of these birds began without a cent if you believe the stories in the success magazines.

"It boils down to this: you have got to have something to sell that a lot of people want and will pay good money for. Now what in the world have I got?"

There was no answer to that. Brains seemed to be a drug on the market, and in this mood of his he was not so sure that he had really valuable brains. His other qualities which he had already enumerated without contradiction by the chair which was his audience, had not won him anything of which to boast.

"Oh, something will turn up pretty soon," he sighed. "Let's pick up a little jazz."

He fumbled with his radio set, but it was about five in the afternoon and there seemed to be no music on the air; instead he picked up a station where a man was talking about something.

CHAPTER III.

WISDOM FROM THE ETHER.

ORDINARILY Lester Lucus cut off ruthlessly persons who dared to use what he considered a musical instrument for speech-making, but he was down-hearted, for him; had enough of his own society, and a name caught him.

"If the name of Thomas Fulton means anything to you, my friends," said an unctuous barytone, "it means textiles. As you may know, I am the chief owner of a group of cotton mills both in New England and the South. I mention this so that you may know that you are being addressed by a person who has achieved some success in the world."

"You swell-headed old skinflint," remarked Lester feelingly. Although he had never met Mr. Fulton, he had worked for a time in the New York offices of the Fulton Mills, where the hours were long, the pay small, and the system of squeezing the last ounce of endeavor out of the employees almost perfect.

"A man who has achieved success rarely wins out by accident or by fortuitous circumstances," said Mr. Fulton. Lester could almost see his satisfied smirk as he spoke. "He is almost always the result of many years of intense application to business, sacrifice of what most people think is worth while, whole-hearted devotion to his life work."

"And the robbery of a few widows and orphans," interposed the listener.

"You will find that such men usually rise from very humble circumstances, and rarely come out of the so-called white-collar classes, the shabby genteel, may I say?

"And the reason is this. They are not ashamed to begin at the very bot-

tom, to turn their hands to whatever will bring in an honest dollar; they have no fear of what their neighbors will say; they are not afraid to get dirt on their faces and muck on their hands. They are willing to put on overalls.

"Within hearing of my voice perhaps are thousands—"

"You flatter yourself," jeered Lester.

"—who are looking for employment, but who would refuse to take anything which meant hard manual labor. They want snaps. They feel above what they call menial work.

"Yet my first job in New York was that of a street cleaner. I was not ashamed to wield shovel and broom on Broadway, despised by the multitude of clerks who passed me by, most of whom are still clerks, or who have died wearing the yoke of office servitude."

Lester's eyes widened, and his manner toward the radio instrument grew less disrespectful.

"I had no capital when I started in business for myself. I opened a tiny shop in lower Broadway, stocked it with shoestrings and hairnets, and kept open ten hours a day. I was both proprietor and clerk.

"At night I lifted my showcase to the floor and slept on my counter. I did that for two years. If I had not been willing to live in such a manner I would not be where I am to-day.

"In some of my clubs I encounter very wealthy men whose past I happened to be acquainted with. One of them was a laborer on a mud scow. Another swept out a saloon, a third carried a basket of pretzels on his arm, still another was a tin peddler, a very wealthy friend of mine worked in a sewer.

"These men had no false pride, and I want to tell you young men who are listening in that you will never get to the top of the ladder without first placing your foot on the bottom rung. Never mind what others think of you; any employment that is honest is good enough for any man. And no one who is ashamed to do the heavy work of the world deserves to succeed in it. That's my message."

The fat, self-satisfied voice died away, and a jazz band suddenly burst into a popular number. Lester mechanically switched it off.

Old Fulton, whom he hated without having encountered him in person, had answered the question that the young man had been asking.

Alone in his room, his buoyant manner had fallen from him. Lester Lucus was serious for once, and doing a little intensive thinking. He walked to his desk and drew from it a check book. His balance was six hundred and seventy dollars, the total accumulations of a college man of twenty-nine who had been in the business world for seven years.

He drew toward him a sheet of paper, picked up a pencil, and began to figure.

"To hell with every one!" he exclaimed. "I'll do it!"

CHAPTER IV.

"RED HOT COPS."

NORA MEAGHER got out of the subway station at Fulton Street and moved swiftly toward the office of the Davenport Realty Company in the Granson Building. It was five minutes of nine.

A number of young men glanced at the pretty face and the slender, graceful figure of the girl in the blue serge business suit, while various women wondered if it was the hat which made her so attractive. A stentorian voice fell upon her ears.

"This way, folks. The fattest frankfurters, the softest rolls, the sweetest butter, and the most delicious morsel that ever titilated a fastidious palate. You never ate a hot dog until you have sampled my police dogs."

The girl stopped short, glanced around with a look of incredulity upon her expressive countenance, and then her eyes rested upon a spectacle which very nearly paralyzed her.

She was looking at a dazzling white counter occupying four feet of the frontage of an old building, and behind the counter stood a well-built, red-headed man in a spotless white suit. In his right hand he held a megaphone, and through it he bellowed his ballyhoo. With his left hand he rolled very fat sausages upon a hot griddle.

A huge sign above his head read "Red Hot Cops," and, in parenthesis, "Belgian Police Dogs." Behind him was a glittering coffee tank, and the counter ran into the building a distance of six feet.

"Be a cannibal. Eat a cop," he bellowed. "Nobody likes policemen. Hurry up, folks. I'm almost sold out."

Half a dozen persons stood on the sidewalk devouring the sandwiches, a dozen more were piled inside the tiny shop, likewise munching frankfurters and rolls, and those who did not stop were smiling at the sign and the chatter of the frankfurter man, and mentally determining to come back when they were hungry.

But Nora was gazing at the man with the megaphone, and a broad smile was on her face. She approached the stand; the owner was bellowing over her head.

"Lester Lucus!" she exclaimed.

Lester dropped his megaphone, and his face grew as red as his hair. His chatter broke off in the middle, and he looked at her with shamed eyes.

"Hello, Nora," he muttered. "So this is what I've come to!"

"Give me a hot cop," commanded Nora. "How much?"

Lester mechanically lifted a frankfurter, slit a roll, and plastered both with German mustard.

"It's on me," he mumbled.

"Don't be silly. What would your employer say?"

"I'd have you know," declared Lester with something of his old manner, "I'm in business for myself."

Her eyes grew round, but she said nothing; instead, took a bite of the sandwich.

"Delicious," she declared.

"How much?" demanded a man who had finished.

"Twenty cents," said the business man.

"How do you get that way? I can buy 'em anywhere for ten cents."

"Not this kind of a frankfurter, not a fresh hot roll and creamy butter. You never tasted a sandwich like that in your life," retorted Lester.

"You're right—I haven't," admitted the customer. "By heck, it's worth twenty cents."

Nora finished her roll. "I've got to go now," she said. "Lester, come out and see me to-night?"

"Do you mean it?"

"I certainly do."

"Gee," he exclaimed, "I never thought you'd speak to me again!"

"You don't know me very well. The hot cop was perfectly lovely," she smiled, then darted away.

Lester lifted his megaphone and began again his ballyhoo. He drew a policeman whose sandwich he franked.

"You got a gall, calling 'em cops," declared the officer. "It's a good line, though."

"Come around again when you're hungry. No charge to the profession," grinned the merchant.

Business was rushing, but about ten thirty it slackened, and Lester removed the cook's cap from his fevered brow and took count of stock. He had laid in a couple of hundred sausages, which he supposed would be an ample supply for the first day, and only a dozen were left.

He was almost out of rolls and he needed to make fresh coffee. Relying upon the innate honesty of people, he left his stand unguarded and went to a telephone, where he ordered a fresh

supply of sausages and rolls, then hastened back and set to work to make coffee according to the directions of the concern which had sold him the coffee tank.

He had been on his feet for two hours, but he was not in the least fatigued; on the contrary, he was so pepped up by his success that he seemed to be standing on air cushions.

Lester had held many jobs, but never before had he felt the thrill which comes to a merchant who invests his money in a stock of goods, opens a shop, and waits for the first customer. The tinkle of coins in the cash register was a more beautiful tune than any he had ever heard in a dance palace.

To think that it was his money; that everything which came into the place belonged to him; he was not making profits for somebody else, but he was in business for himself.

Aside from his overhead and cost of supplies, which he reckoned as six cents upon a twenty-cent sandwich, the receipts were all profit, and in a trifle over two hours he had made something over thirty dollars. Lester had never earned over sixty dollars a week in his life.

He knew that there would be a huge lunch business, a good afternoon trade, and there ought to be some activity between five and six. After that he might as well close up for the day; down town New York is deserted at night.

And what a sport Nora had been! Some girls would have gone by with their noses in the air when they recognized their old office acquaintance running a frankfurter stand, but Nora had not only patronized him but wanted him to come to see her to-night. Would a duck swim?

The Hot Cop Palace was the direct result of the radio lecture by Thomas Fulton. At any other time Mr. Fulton's remarks would have been greeted by ribald laughter, but he had caught Lester at the psychological moment; for the first time in his life he had taken stock of himself and found the stock unsalable.

A Greek named Luke Nike had been operating this particular stand, and business had not been good. Lester had been in the habit of passing the place daily, and upon an occasion about a week previous had stopped for a hot dog and found it atrocious.

"Why the deuce don't you buy good stuff?" he had demanded of the discouraged and wizened proprietor.

"I don't make no money now," retorted the man. "De good stuff cost twice some more."

"Then charge twice as much," suggested the young man.

The Greek shook his head. "Then nobody buy. Ten cents is de price for de hot dog."

"You give them good stuff and they'll pay for it," he declared.

"Yes? Say, mister, you know so much about this stand. I sell cheap. Two hundred fifty dol. Yes?"

"I buy a frankfurter stand? On your way, Demosthenes," he retorted, and departed laughing.

Yet the notion that the man's failure was due to poor quality of goods stuck in Lester's mind, along with other miscellany, and the business opportunity which had been offered to him recalled itself when he heard Fulton's homily upon the necessity of starting at the bottom.

After all, why not? Clean the stand up, get a good slogan, use up-to-date methods, and he ought to be able to make the place pay.

Suppose people he knew did see him and laugh? What had anybody ever done for him? Fulton was right; the multimillionaires all began in a piking way and succeeded because they were indifferent to public opinion.

Running a frankfurter stand was a business. If illiterate Greeks and Italians could make a living in that way, what could not be done by an intelligent American familiar with business methods, a real salesman?

In his mood he began to think it would be an agreeable thing to affront his useless acquaintances by going into this business. Maybe he would sell a frankfurter to old man Davenport some day, and he would keep rat poison in reserve to plaster on it instead of mustard.

Hot dogs. Why not carry the joke still further? The finest dogs are Belgian police dogs; he would advertise Belgian police dogs, and call them hot cops. Make the people laugh and they are your friends.

Lester slept on the idea, and woke up in favor of it, then hastened down town and astonished the Greek by buying him out with two hundred dollars in cash. He found the rent of the eight-by-twelve shop to be fifty dollars a month, and was a bit alarmed to learn that he could not have a lease; sooner or later the building would be torn down. "But you may be there for ten years," the agent assured him.

It cost him three hundred dollars to refit the place as he considered necessary, and he opened up hopefully but not too confidently three days later.

How did he know that Nike wasn't right when he declared that people would not pay more than a dime for a hot dog? How did he know that anybody would respond to his ballyhoo or sales talk through a megaphone. It was a gamble, and having been a salaried man all his life this kind of a gamble terrified him.

Hot dogs! A thousand years from now, when antiquarians are delving into the manners and customs of the ancient race known as Americans, they may run across some of these signs of frankfurter stands, and gravely assume that the old inhabitants of North America, while highly civilized in many respects, adepts in the use of mechanics, yet had the disgusting habit of consuming dog meat.

Lester had purchased the finest sausages on the market, made a deal with a baker for rolls fresh from the oven, laid in a tub of the best quality of butter, placed in his tank the finest Mocha and Java coffee, and awaited eventualities. We know the result.

When he put up the shutters at half past six that night and opened his rented cash register, he was hardly able to believe that he knew arithmetic. The day's receipts were over two hundred dollars.

Of this Lester estimated that about sixty-seven per cent was clear profit, or one hundred and thirty-four dollars. Good heavens, if a frankfurter stand paid a hundred and thirty-four dollars a day, why did people work for salaries? The fools! That was more than the average clerk earns in a month—more than he had ever earned in a fortnight.

At that rate he would soon be rich, and all from a frankfurter stand. Of course, the novelty was responsible for part of the brisk trade, but assume that he cleared seventy-five dollars a day—four hundred and fifty dollars a week. It just couldn't be true!

He thrust the receipts in his trousers pocket and doffed his white suit. Dinner at the Biltmore or at the Ritz; he could afford it. And then a long ride up to Two Hundred and Eightieth Street to tell Nora all about it. He had to tell somebody, for he was bursting with joy.

He hadn't seen a soul he knew except Nora during the day, but now let the poor saps pass by and sneer at him. Moffett, office manager of Fulton's, who earned seventy-five dollars per week, and had fired him with aspersions upon his energy and ability; Davenport, old Davenport, with all his crooked ways, didn't clear as much as that in a week out of his development, and took a chance of going to jail for misrepresentation.

It was dark when he emerged from his stand, snapped the padlock on the door, and started for the subway station. He had hardly gone twenty feet when a man stepped out of a doorway

and thrust a black object against his stomach which Lester knew was a revolver.

"Stick 'em up, bo," was the command.

It was the first time in his life that Lester Lucus had encountered a holdup man, but instinctively he knew what to do. He stuck them up. His eyes roamed about for help, and he saw that the streets were by no means deserted; there were people on the opposite side, a couple of men fifty feet ahead, a pair of girls just beyond at the entrance to a subway kiosk; but no policeman was visible.

The robber was not flourishing his weapon so that all who passed might see; he was standing within a foot of Lester, talking confidentially, so it seemed, and the gun was poked against the ribs of the young merchant prince. In Lester's trousers pocket was a huge roll of bills, in both his coat pockets were a pound or two of silver; his impulse was to swing on the bandit and save his hard-earned profits.

Holdup men, he had read, were cowards, drug addicts, sniveling hounds who fled at the first sign of resistance, and who were too much in fear of the electric chair to shoot. The thing to do is to present a bold front to a holdup man, show fight, and nine times out of ten escape harm.

Only, suppose this was the tenth time? Suppose this robber was of a different type from the regular brand, a desperado who could not be scared off, a man who had just as soon kill as eat, a bad-tempered fellow who would resent disobedience so much he would disregard consequences?

In that case, all he had to do would be crook his forefinger about a quarter of an inch and a slug of lead would go tearing into Lester's stomach, raising mischief, interfering with his digestion, preventing him from being on hand to sell hot cops in the morning.

What, after all, was a couple of hundred dollars? A small sum, not worth the loss of a good man's life. If he obeyed his impulse to land on the jaw of the gimlet-eyed bandit, he would probably save his day's receipts, but he might rest upon a marble slab at the morgue.

It takes a lot of words to describe the mental reactions of Lester Lucus to the jab in the ribs with the muzzle of a revolver, but they all happened in a fraction of a second while his hands were going skyward.

"Step in here," commanded the yegg, backing into the doorway. Lester stepped. Keeping the gun leveled with his right hand, the robber thrust his left into the right trousers pocket of his captive and, with some difficulty, withdrew a huge roll of ones and fives.

"Hot dog!" he exulted.

"That's the way I got it," said Lester, who could not resist the opening.

"Shut up!" He jammed the cash into his own left trousers pocket, then felt of Lester's jacket pockets, and his eyes gleamed as he touched the halves, quarters, dimes, and nickels.

"I seen you was hauling it in," he said pleasantly as he made the transfer. "Gee, feller, you made a clean-up to-day!"

"You mean you did," retorted Lester, trying to impress the man's appearance on his mind.

The fellow was undersized, slouching, wore one of those nondescript, mud-colored suits of clothes and an old gray cap, which was pulled down over his forehead. All Les could see was a pair of small black eyes, a red broad nose, and a chin covered with black stubble. The collar was turned up. Go into any cheap Bowery lodging house and you would find a score of derelicts who looked exactly like him, Lester thought.

But the robber had now emptied both pockets of silver, and the shape of the young man's well-cut coat was no longer distorted by the weight of several hundred coins. The man ran his hand across his prisoner's vest, and

found a watch chain, which he yanked away, and a small, thin, gold-plated watch came away with it.

"Have a heart," protested the victim.

"G'wan. Now, feller, you walk to the subway station and go down without speaking to anybody. I'm here watching you, and the first move you make to get help you get a bullet in the back. You take the subway uptown, see?"

"Give me a nickel, then," pleaded Lester. "You've cleaned me out."

A grin cut the countenance of the bandit.

"I'm a good guy," he stated. "Here is half a dollar. Now get the hell out of here."

So Lester walked away. He did not suppose that the highwayman was actually watching him, ready to fill him with lead if he failed to obey orders, but there was a chance; and as he walked away gooseflesh covered him from neck to ankle.

Besides, no policeman was visible, and he knew human nature well enough to be aware that if he did stop a pedestrian and ask him to return with him to capture an armed robber that pedestrian would be annoyed.

Instead, he descended the subway steps and crossed to the other side of the street, where he emerged and sought a policeman. It took him three or four minutes to locate one, and the officer listened to him without much interest.

"You better go to the station and tell your story to the sergeant," he advised. "I'm on duty here, and you bet the crook is a mile away by now. Notice any distinguishing marks?"

"Well, no."

"Didn't have any scars on his face or hands?"

"I didn't see any."

"How the heck are we going to find him? You ought to have better sense than carry a couple of hundred dollars on your person. How do I know you was robbed anyway?"

"Where's the station?" asked Lester wearily.

"Three blocks up and one to the right."

Fully aware that he was wasting his time, Lester trudged to the station house, where he answered a lot of questions about himself, proved his right to own two hundred dollars, gave a perfectly worthless description of the brigand, and was finally permitted to depart.

He was exceedingly down-hearted as he left the station house. That he would never see his money again he was certain; as crimes go, what had happened to him was petty larceny, and the police were not in the least interested. But he had worked harder to-day than ever before in his life, had realized a thumping profit; and it was all gone, together with his day's expenses.

He was out about sixty-five or seventy dollars, which had to be made up, or he could buy no more rolls or sausages or coffee. Fortunately he still had a hundred dollars to his credit in the bank, which would stock him up to-morrow and pay to-day's losses; and perhaps to-morrow, also, would be a busy day.

It might be worse, he decided as he rode uptown in the subway. The yegg had been lurking in the neighborhood for hours, had learned he owned no safe and must carry the receipts away with him, so had lain in wait.

Perhaps he would also be waiting to-morrow night; but to-morrow Les would fool him. He could afford to hire a boy, in view of the business that he was doing, and he would leave the stand several times during the day to deposit his takings in a good, stout bank.

The incident was unfortunate but not ruinous, and in the future he would be on the alert for holdup men. In his room he knew he had five or six dol-

lars in cash; he could afford to go to dinner and then journey uptown and call on Nora Meagher.

There was a girl with democratic principles. While she had never permitted the debonair and well-dressed sales manager of the Davenport Realty Company to call on her, she invited the frankfurter salesman without the slightest hesitation. Not many girls like her.

Lester Lucus, not so triumphant as he had been when he shut up the Hot Cop Emporium, but no longer as perturbed as he had been, changed his clothes at his room on lower Riverside Drive, and emerged whistling a cheerful tune, prepared for his journey into the hinterland via subway and tram car.

CHAPTER V.

THE SAUSAGE KING.

THE gentlemen who make photoplays would like it very much if the public would stop calling them movies, and Ludwig Brinker, the owner of the Comet Brand of nonpareil frankfurter sausages was in a perpetual state of fury because people persisted in referring to his product as "dogs."

Not long ago, at a banquet, the toastmaster, a very waggish fellow, introduced Mr. Brinker as the Canine King, and Ludwig forgot his speech and was only able to sputter indignantly.

The Comet factory used healthy, fat and succulent pigs and good beef in their sausages. Dogs wandered fearlessly and free in the town of Weeman, New Jersey, where the chief factory was located.

Ludwig would no more have permitted a terrier or an Airedale to pass through one of his chopping machines than he would have consented to make meat out of human beings.

And despite all this, his nickname was Bow Wow Brinker, and when his two daughters wished to make him very mad they gazed at him mournfully and remarked: "Woof, woof!"

The Comet factory employed six hundred men and women, paid them good wages, built several rows of comfortable houses for them, in which few of them would consent to live, and otherwise tried to be up to date.

There were rest rooms in the factory, occasional lectures, a system of merits and bonuses which gave ambitious butchers a chance to get on in the world. The industry was the heart and soul of Weeman, yet the ungrateful inhabitants insisted upon referring to the place as Pupville.

Mr. Brinker had offices in New York, and a large apartment on East Fifty-Sixth Street, but he had to spend a lot of time at the factory, and the persistence of the dog myth in Weeman caused him to sour on the town.

Ludwig Brinker was an American born and bred. His grandfather came to America in 1870, from Wiesbaden, and his father had been stupid enough to belong to various turnvereins, to associate exclusively with Germans, and to name his only child Ludwig; but the owner of the name was so American he would have joined the Ku Klux Klan if they permitted him to do so.

In appearance Mr. Brinker was globular; but, unlike most fat men, he was not jolly. He had a pair of small blue eyes, pale hair which was now turning gray, a nose which was short and broad. and a mouth which was large but turned down instead of up. If he was kind-hearted, he tried very hard to conceal the fact, and succeeded.

His point of view was uniformly pessimistic, his ordinary tone of voice was a bellow, and he didn't think anybody else was any good, and didn't hesitate to say so.

At the factory they called him Groucho, with some reason. To hear him talk to his daughters, one would

suppose he hated them; and as for his secretary, the poor young man was getting deaf from continual roaring in his ears.

In early youth his two daughters had been terribly afraid of their father, but as time passed and he neither murdered nor maimed them, they came to the conclusion that he was a false alarm, and defied him with impunity.

If they wanted pretty clothes, these were forthcoming after a battle; if they needed money, they got it; and they bobbed their hair and rolled their stockings despite a verbal barrage which would have exterminated less daring Amazons.

About the time that Lester Lucus was taking the subway for Two Hundred and Eightieth Street, New York City, Mr. Ludwig Brinker, his two daughters, and his housekeeper were sitting at dinner in a dining room little smaller than the waiting room of the Grand Central Station, and nowhere near so homelike.

Mr. Brinker sat at the head of the table and personally carved a leg of lamb.

At his right sat Miss Francesca Brinker, who was brunette and large and not in the least bad looking. She had very big brown eyes, a plump face with pretty teeth, though her nose was a trifle flat and her chin not exactly indicative of great will power.

She wore an evening dress of yellow satin cut so low that it was evident that she was admirably upholstered around the neck and shoulders, and she had a string of pearls around her throat that were worth, at a guess, about fourteen thousand five hundred Comet sausages.

At the left of Mr. Brinker sat his daughter Hilda. Hilda was only unengaged by Florenz Ziegfeld because she had never asked him for a job. She was small, dainty, delectable and blond, and her bobbed yellow hair was parted in the middle and minus a permanent wave or even a curl.

It framed a sweet and pert little face, the principal feature of which was a pair of dark blue eyes. Her nose was straight and thin, her upper lip so short she seemed always about to smile, her chin small and well turned, her neck long and graceful, and her shoulders sloped in a deliciously feminine manner.

She owned a string of pearls worth the Lord knows how many sausages, and she wore a red silk dress which, if folded skillfully, could be tucked in her vanity case.

Both these young ladies had legs, but they were under the table, and Mr. Brinker couldn't complain about bare knees that were hidden by the tablecloth.

The housekeeper sat at the other end of the small table at which the family was dining. We don't have to describe her, because she looked just like a housekeeper, sort of vinegary, with an expression in her eye which said that she wouldn't have to be doing this if her husband had thought to get enough insurance.

"All dressed up like horses," growled Mr. Brinker. "Where are you girls going—and you better stay at home for one night anyway."

"Just to the theater," said Hilda in what might be described as a fluted voice.

"Who you going with? A couple of half-witted nincompoops," asked and replied Mr. Brinker. He loved to answer his own questions, and his answers always satisfied him.

"Something like that," said Hilda sweetly. "Cheer up, dad—we're not going to marry them."

"Carry on the way you're doing, and nobody will marry you," sneered Mr. Brinker. "My Lord, a man would have to be crazy to marry girls that go round without clothes on. Hey, Mrs. Winter?"

"It's dreadful, Mr. Brinker, but it is the mode," replied the housekeeper with a dolorous shake of her head.

"Mode! I suppose if some French actress stripped naked it would be all right for well-brought-up American girls to do it. Not that these are well brought up—a couple of weeds, that's what they are."

"Much obliged, daddy," said Francesca. "Shall we tell him what we saw this afternoon, Hilda?"

"Try to tell him anything," replied that dutiful daughter.

"Is that so?" thundered Mr. Brinker. "I don't claim to know it all, like my daughters. What did you see, Francesca?"

"We passed a new frankfurter stand; an awfully good looking fellow was running it, but what amused us was he was shouting through a megaphone:

"'Get your police dogs here. Red hot cops.'"

Mr. Brinker was drinking coffee, and suddenly choked.

"Police dogs!" he shouted. "Well, that's too much."

"So we bought a couple, and what do you think, father? They were Comet brand. The brand was stamped on the sausage skin."

Hilda giggled. "Wasn't that a funny name for them, father? Hot cops! Police dogs, you see; so he calls them cops. And he was quite a nice chap, too—not at all the sort of man who runs a frankfurter stand."

"I'll have the fellow prosecuted," bellowed Ludwig Brinker. "Police dogs, indeed! It's about time these people were stopped calling frankfurters dogs, and this is the limit. I'll see that he gets no more Comets. My sausages are made entirely of young veal and pigs."

"You don't say!" commented Hilda. "What a time you'll have making the public stop calling them dogs!"

"I'll bring suit. I'll have this particular rascal enjoined. Where did you say his stand was?"

"Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street," replied Hilda, winking at her sister. "If the police force don't object to his calling them cops, I don't see why you should. After all, he probably pays for his sausages."

"What do I care? Police dogs! Hot cops! Brrrr!"

"Come on, Francesca," said Hilda. "While dad is digesting that one, let's get ready. The boys will be here in a few minutes."

"Do you know the name of the show we're going to see to-night, father?" asked Francesca.

Mr. Brinker regarded her sourly.

"Whatever you tell me, that won't be it. I know you."

"'Hot Diggety Dog,'" she informed him, and, emitting peals of laughter, the disrespectful daughters fled from the dining room, leaving a very angry parent behind them. Presently he heard male voices in the hall, giggles, the slam of the front door, and he knew he was left alone in the house.

The old gentleman rose and, with a crafty smile, unlocked a little door in the buffet. Thrusting in his arm, he drew out a bottle of whisky and poured himself a reasonable drink.

"Hot police dogs!" he muttered as he quaffed. "I'll fix him. I'd like to run him through my sausage machine!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE PARIAH.

NORA MEAGHER lived on the fourth floor of a very large apartment house in the district to which New Yorkers of moderate means have been forced to retreat before old General High Cost of Living.

Such apartments bear a surface resemblance to the majestic rabbit warrens of the seventies and eighties—referring to New York streets, not years of the last century—with ornate entrances, wide hallways, a uniformed attendant, and a house telephone desk; but where the latter are of marble and

bronze, these hallways are of plaster and cast iron.

The man in uniform is not spick and span; he smokes a pipe on duty, and also serves as telephone operator on occasion, which explains why each tenant has to put in a private phone if he wants service.

The presence of children on the sidewalk and in the hallway is another give-away. You never see children in the environs of the really high-class apartment houses; while some permit dogs, all are agreed that children are a nuisance.

Lester Lucus realized that he was entering a nest of fifty and sixty dollar per month flats as soon as he passed through the front door, but that did not disturb him, because he knew that Nora was not living away up here because of the fresh air from the Hudson River.

"Please tell Miss Meagher that Mr. Lucus is here," he said to the attendant who was sprawled on a bench reading Dempsey's personal statement of how he was going to win his next fight.

The man did not stir.

"G'wan up," he advised. "We do not announce nobody. If she don't want to see you, she'll just slam the door in yer face. Fourth floor, apartment G."

Lester entered one of the press-the-button elevators, which ruined the elevator men's profession, and rose slowly to the fourth floor.

Presently it stopped of its own accord, and he emerged into a badly lighted hallway with cement floor and walls which had been whitewashed once and needed it again, poked around until he found a door initialed "G," and pressed the bell.

The door was opened by Nora, who affected astonishment at the sight of the man she had invited to call.

"Why, Mr. Lucus, this is a surprise!" she said heartily. "Come right in. Imagine you finding your way so far uptown!"

She removed his hat and hung it on a cast-iron hatrack, then steered him by one arm past several closed doors, and pushed him into a small parlor which was not unoccupied.

A gentleman was sitting there with legs crossed displaying woolen socks, of a violent pattern which astute manufacturers are persuading young men of fashion to wear now that you can get pretty good silk socks for seventy-five cents.

"The fancy woolen sock is the mark of the well-dressed man," so Lester had read in a theater program recently. In his right hand, between first and second fingers, the stranger sported a cigar the aroma of which said twenty-five cents as plainly as if the smoke spelled it out in the air.

The socks and the cigar were the most prominent things about Randolph Milligan, which is why we mention them first. Lester saw that this person was about thirty. He wore white flannel trousers, white shoes, a blue coat, and a white silk shirt, soft collar, and a necktie which matched his socks.

On his long, earnest face was a small black mustache and an expression of great annoyance, and he rose just to show he was well bred, and affected to be pleased to meet Mr. Lucus.

Nora, a twinkle in her eye, made Les acquainted with Mr. Milligan.

"You two boys ought to know each other," she said. "You're in the same line of business."

Lester grinned at that. "Not really?" he demanded.

Mr. Milligan, having said the essential, refused to follow it up with a welcoming smile.

"Indeed!" he grunted as he resumed his seat.

Lester dropped into a straight-backed chair, because Milligan had the only armchair, and Nora seated herself upon the sofa and looked as demure as a cat which has just eaten the family's lamb chops.

While a man in his office and in his social hours looks about the same, except when he is in evening dress, and then he looks uncomfortable, there is as much difference between a girl stenographer as she sits at her desk and the same girl when she is entertaining in her parlor as there is between Queen Mary when she is doing the housework in Windsor Castle and when she puts on her royal robes to receive a flock of American débutantes at court.

Nora was pretty enough at the Davenport Realty Company office, but she had a business manner; now, in a little blue organdie, minus sleeves and low in the neck, she wasn't the same girl at all.

Lester thought she was really beautiful.

"Nice weather we're having," said Milligan.

"Pretty good for the time of year. Did you hear how the ball game came out?"

"Yankees won. Ruth made two home runs."

Milligan looked at Nora appealingly as if to say: "Who is the big ruffian, and how can we get rid of him?"

Lester also threw her a glance of reproach. "In view of the fact that you asked me to come, why should I have to talk to a thing like this?" was what his eyes demanded.

Nora understood them both, and smiled wickedly.

"Mr. Lucus used to work for the Davenport Company, Mr. Milligan," she explained. "He never did me the honor of calling on me before."

"That so?" replied Milligan indifferently.

Lester looked him over thoughtfully. The cigar, the socks, the tie, the black mustache were the principal features of the gentleman, but it was possible that a girl might consider him good looking; the sort of inane stiff who posed for collar ads or played the hero in the movies.

He wondered what his status might be in this establishment. While Lester was not in love with Nora, had never considered her anything except a good little scout with an Irish sense of humor, it was exasperating, when he had so much to tell her, to find the place full of uninteresting people.

"What line are you in?" he asked casually.

"Same as yours. I'm secretary to Ludwig Brinker."

"Ludwig Brinker? Guess I don't know him."

"You must if you're in the packing business. He owns the Comet brand."

"Oh," ejaculated Lester, throwing an indignant glance at Nora. While he was not ashamed of his new occupation—at least, not much ashamed of it—he knew how this person would regard the proprietor of a frankfurter stand.

It was mean of Nora to have made that remark. In a moment Milligan would ask him what he did, and he would have to tell him.

"Sausages," he said. "I get you now. What do you think of the European situation?"

"What European situation?"

"Why—er—you know, the League of Nations, Mussolini, universal disarmament."

"It's a lot of bunk," replied Milligan.

"Well, maybe you're right."

Silence descended. Nora hummed a little tune and regarded her polished finger nails.

"Miss Meagher and I were considering taking in a picture before you came," asserted Milligan.

"That was before Mr. Lucus came," said Nora quickly. "I think it's much nicer to sit here and talk about the European situation, don't you?"

"No," said Milligan impolitely.

"Mr. Lucus, do you use the Comet brand?" asked Nora.

"Why—er—yes. They are pretty good sausages."

"Best on the market," replied Mr.

Brinker's secretary. "The old man prides himself upon using only the finest quality of—"

"Pups," interpolated Nora.

Milligan frowned. "Nonsense. Pork and beef. The way people call them dogs is very annoying and bad for business."

"Mr. Lucus has a new name for them. Red hot cops! Don't you think that's clever, Mr. Milligan?"

"I don't get the connection," he said haughtily.

"You see," explained Nora, ignoring the signals of distress from Lester, "Mr. Lucus develops the dog idea. He sells Belgian police dogs, and that suggests police, and police naturally means cops. Red hot cops."

"I don't think that's funny at all," replied Mr. Brinker's secretary.

"But you sell a lot of them, don't you, Lester?"

"Sell them? Is this gentleman the proprietor of a delicatessen store?"

"No," said Lester, with very red cheeks. "I run a hot-dog stand."

Milligan gazed at him in astonishment, then in disgust.

"A frankfurter stand? Do you mean to say, Miss Meagher, that you receive people like that?"

"I receive whom I please," snapped Nora.

"Upon my word," remarked Milligan—"upon my word! Red hot cops! A frankfurter stand!" He regarded Lester with loathing.

Lester thought he could lick him in a rough-and-tumble, and waited only for an aggressive word; but the secretary did not speak it. Instead, he rose, drew a handkerchief from his cuff and wiped a moist brow.

"If you will excuse me, Miss Meagher, I must be going now. There are things I have got to do."

"Oh, must you go?" protested Nora.

Milligan made a wide detour around Lester and reached the exit uncontaminated. Nora was guilty of a wink at the hot-dog man, then rose and let the departing guest out the front door.

When she returned she threw herself on her sofa, kicked her heels in a most unladylike manner, and shrieked with laughter.

Lester scowled at her.

"That was a rotten thing to do," he growled. "You just made a bum out of me before that fourflusher. Miss Meagher, I think I have important things to do, also. If I hurry I may be able to kick that fashion plate where it will hurt him."

Nora rose to her feet and pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Déclassé! Pariah!" she exclaimed. "Leper! Social outcast! How much did you make to-day, Les?"

"I suppose so," he said glumly. "That fathead probably gets about fifty a week for being the 'yes' man to old What's His Name, but he could not sit in the same room with the proprietor of a hot-dog stand. I made two hundred dollars to-day, of which about one hundred and thirty-three dollars was clear profit."

"Lester Lucus!" she exclaimed. "It doesn't seem possible! One day at a frankfurter stand, and you cleared one hundred—"

"Easy come, easy go," he grinned. "I got about six feet away from the place, when a fellow stuck a gun into my stomach and cleaned me out."

"And you gave it to him?"

"Yes, lady. I just let him take my profit and my gross receipts. I'm about sixty-six dollars loser on my first day as a merchant, thus demonstrating that all is not gold that glitters, or what have you."

"But the police will get it back."

"You are nothing but an unsophisticated child. The police never get anything back except an automobile that is insured, and you don't want that back."

Impulsively Nora grasped his hand and squeezed it. "I'm so sorry, Les," she exclaimed. "I don't think I ever

really liked you until to-day when I saw how you were tackling a job that most men would think beneath them."

"And all for no good purpose except to bring joy to a yeggman's family."

"You were always so glib in the office, so self-satisfied, so cocky, and I didn't see any reason why you should be so puffed up. You weren't doing so darn well. That's why I used to razz you."

"You used to give me a pain," he assured her. "I figured out that you knew what I was getting and you wouldn't be bothered being friends with a sixty-dollar-a-week man."

"You saw how Randolph Milligan retreated when he found out the sort of business you were in," she smiled. "I supposed you were that sort of fellow, too. It took courage, didn't it, Les, to set up in business in Lower Broadway where people you knew might see you. How did you ever come to do it?"

Lester expanded in the light of her admiration. "I listened in on the radio the other night to a swell-headed old ape I used to work for who was telling young men how to succeed.

"It was a lot of apple sauce except for one thing. He said that the big millionaires almost invariably came from the lower classes, very seldom from families that were shabby genteel, and the reason was that, as boys, they had no false shame.

"That hit me and I saw what was the matter with me. I was a college man and my folks were nice people; so I couldn't begin at the bottom of the ladder. I wanted to start about halfway up."

Nora's eyes sparkled with interest. "That's true, Les," she exclaimed. "It's just as true of me as it is of you. My folks came from Ireland a couple of generations ago and didn't hesitate to take any kind of work they could get but my father was a clerk and of course his daughter had to get into some polite occupation; so I pound the typewriter for an old crook and help him deceive people into buying worthless land, instead of earning money honestly and living luxuriously as a parlor maid for some rich family."

"Well—" he ejaculated with an amused look in his eye.

"Not on your life. I couldn't be a menial if they paid three times what they do, but you're different; you're not a servant but a business man."

"Yet socially I'm taboo."

"Nonsense. If a man has money, no woman worries much where it came from. Look at that song writer who started as a waiter and married into the best New York society."

"Not exactly received with open arms," he objected.

"Oh, they'll accept him. Give them time."

"Who is this Milligan person? How did you run across him?" Lester asked.

"Oh, I've known Randolph a long time. He wants to marry me."

"Don't you do it," he advised earnestly. "He carries his handkerchief in his cuff."

"Oh, Ranny isn't bad. He would be neat to have around the house. It was a shock to him to find I was entertaining a hot dog man and he didn't take it well, but I like him and he was going to take me to a movie."

Lester rose at the hint. "Come on," he invited. "Anything in particular you want to see?"

"Gloria Swanson has a new picture at the Colonial. I wouldn't drag you away down town and then up again."

In a few minutes they left the apartment and joined the throng which was moving into the lobby of a big neighborhood picture palace, where for awhile Les forgot his troubles, little reckoning that fate was holding in store for him experiences beside which the holdup of that evening would seem like an incident of small importance.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Man from the Rio Grande

By ARTHUR EVAN JAMES

The boaster of Copper Gulch gets a chance to make good in finding the killer of three, and leads a chase that has an altogether unlooked-for finish

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

"YES, sir-ee, boys, back in them days of the Mexican greaser fracases I was the main two-fisted, two-gunned ripsnorter of the Rio Grande. And the hand what's holdin' my next drink is the hand that sent Moctezuma Joe, the chief of them low-down greasers, to the happy hunting grounds. Them was the days! Rustlin' Mexicans, hell-raisin' Indians, fresh-mouthed whites was all alike to me—they all stopped their capers for keeps whenever they was unlucky enough to get in range of my shootin' irons.

"Never a month went by but what I didn't have to cut a new notch on one of my shooters—sometimes as many as four or five. My killin's and notches got comin' so fast for a spell that I almost cut the grips clean off my guns.

"But things ain't like that now, 'specially 'way up here in Nevada—everything's too damn tame in these parts!"

Old Jake Hawkins jerked his big gray hat to a rakish angle, and his bleary blue eyes passed swiftly over his listeners in the Lucky Strike Saloon.

Then he drew himself to his full five foot nine, threw out his red flannel-shirted chest to make the most out of his some one hundred and sixty odd pounds, stroked his long gray beard in the manner of one well pleased with himself, and started to raise his glass to his lips with a gesture of scorn.

Ever since Jake Hawkins had landed in the mining town of Copper Gulch some three weeks before, his constant boastings, while under the influence of the wet goods dispensed over the bar,

had been the subject of much speculation among the patrons of the Lucky Strike Saloon.

Some contended that old Jake had actually been the bold and deadly hero he pictured himself, while others were of the firm opinion that he was nothing but a bragging old bluff.

And for want of other and better subjects, this discussion of the true status of Jake Hawkins had become the leading topic in casual conversation in Copper Gulch.

"I just caught that last remark of yourn, Jake—how things was too tame in these parts." Silk Wilson, the district judge and an outspoken opponent of old Jake, was the speaker. "I guess yuh hain't heard about Bryden, the Loder paymaster, and his two helpers, Sam Saxe and Cherokee Joe."

Judge Wilson had just walked into the Lucky Strike as old Jake was in the midst of his daily boastings to the noon hour crowd lined along the bar.

What was to have been Jake's fifth drink halted abruptly before it reached his mouth as he stared silently and wide eyed at the judge.

"No—no!" "What's up, judge?" "Anything critical?" A mixture of voices broke out from the crowd.

"Critical!" the judge roared, one hand clutching at the long lapel of his faded frock coat, his distinct emblem of authority in a region of flannel shirts and buckskin jackets, while the other tugged nervously at his bushy, iron gray mustache. "It's more than that! Them three Loder fellows are deaders right—each single one of 'em has got a hole bored clean through him with a forty-five. And it was all pulled off by a lone trigger tickler at that! But he didn't get a blamed cent—Bryden's satchel was only stuffed with samples of rock."

"And you don't know who the fellow was—the fellow what did the shootin', I mean?" old Jake asked, hitching up his wide cartridge belt and moving closer to the judge.

"Naw, we ain't even got any idea. Sam Saxe was still alive when some of th' boys found 'em lying in the brush a little while ago, but all he could tell 'em, 'fore he cashed out, was that the man had a blue handkerchief tied over his face, wore a long black poncho, and was of about ordinary size. And one thing I near plumb forgot—Sam saw a big blue star tattooed above the killer's left elbow as his bare arms stuck out from the slits in the poncho while th' killer worked his guns! But even that don't tell us anything.

"When the boys first found Sam, Bryden and Cherokee Joe were as dead as doornails. And by the time I got up thar Sam was a deader, too.

"It seems th' killer sprang out from th' brush on them Loder fellows as they was goin' through the pass to their No. 2 shaft this mornin', and got 'em all 'fore any of 'em could nail him, the mean devil thinkin' Bryden's satchel was filled with pay money.

"While to-day's the regular pay day for the Loder outfit, it 'pears Bryden, for some reason or other, wasn't goin' tuh hand over th' dough tuh th' boys till to-morrow. But, of course, the killer didn't know that!"

"That fellow, whoever he was, must have been as fast as greased lightning with his guns!" the bartender exclaimed. "Sam Saxe and Cherokee Joe was th' two best gun spitters we had in these parts! And tuh think he could catch 'em both, with Bryden thrown in! Seems mighty funny Sam wouldn't have some idea who he was—a fellow what could work a trigger like that oughtn't be no stranger to him!"

"Some of th' boys got a hunch he's Alkali Pete, that terrible killer from down Arizona way. But whoever he is, it's pretty sartain he's a stranger around these diggin's."

The judge reached into his coat pocket and produced a curious braided thong hatband, its rough edges resembling the teeth of a coarse saw, and held it up for inspection.

"Near the place of the holdup they found this here funny twisted leather hatband," he went on; "somethin' altogether different from anything you ever seen around these parts. Looks like the killer got tangled up in the brush as he was sneakin' up on them Loder fellows and lost it."

"S'pose the sheriff's on his trail by this time, ain't he?" old Jake asked nonchalantly, turning again to his drink on the bar.

The judge glared at his questioner.

"You know darn well th' sheriff's been laid up in his bed for the last two days, Jake! Seeing how I'm the judge here, it's up to me to appoint a substitute sheriff to land that killer. And I was stumped proper just who to name till a minute ago, when I saw you standin' here at th' bar, handin' out yore old spiel about what a great lead slinger yuh was down on th' Rio Grande. You're the man! This oughta clean up another matter what's been on our minds for some time, along with who caused th' Loder fellows' deaths!"

To the crowd of miners, prospectors and desert rats gathered in the smoky, low-ceilinged barroom of the Lucky Strike, this challenge to Jake Hawkins's veracity held equal importance with the tragedy. To a man, they were just as anxious to see how old Jake would face this test as they were to have the killer apprehended.

Those who sided with Jake were loud in their shouts of approval of the judge's selection, feeling that Jake would acquit himself with credit. While those who had belittled him in various discussions smiled in a knowing way, glad to have the opportunity of proving the falsity of Jake's extravagant claims. Both factions, however, eagerly awaited Jake's answer.

"Don't—don't know about that, judge—me takin' th' sheriff's place," Jake stammered. "You see, I ain't as young as I used tuh be back in them days along the Rio Grande. Besides, I ain't been here long enough to get a good lay of th' land, and that's a lot of help when you're runnin' down a bad man in these parts."

Jake's disparagers exchanged satisfied winks and glances, while his supporters were completely floored.

"Jist as I thought!" the judge snapped. "You ain't got the guts to chase a rabbit! And tuh hear you tellin' about notchin' away th' grips of yore guns—huh!"

Jake's face flushed. "Don't get so hasty, judge! Maybe it ain't altogether a case of guts. Ever think about that?"

"Well, what is it, then?" the judge shouted back. "And I can't see that it takes so much nerve at that—not with a big posse like we'll give yuh to land one lone man! Every one of th' others will be riskin' almost as much as yuh."

It appeared to the crowd in the Lucky Strike that Judge Wilson was bent upon making old Jake's humiliation complete, pressing his victim as he did, when there were plenty of others in the room both willing and capable of filling the sheriff's place.

Old Jake assumed a thoughtful frown.

"Thinkin' it over, judge," he finally said, "I guess I'll take you up—that's provided yuh give me a right respectable posse. But some of th' other boys has got tuh help me lead th' way, 'cause I don't know th' ground well enough."

"S'pose you'd like a battery of artillery from Fort Graydon tuh go ahead of yuh!" the judge grunted. "Well, you cain't have that, but yore posse 'll be plenty."

"Jist how many?" old Jake asked.

To the inhabitants of Copper Gulch gathered in the Lucky Strike, not only Jake's detractors but his former supporters as well, the whole thing was becoming a farce. Old Jake had plainly shown that his much vaunted bravery existed only in his mind, and why should the judge persist in forcing him into a task far from his liking, when there were so many others about?

What did it matter, at a time like this, if Jake had called the judge a crazy old fool one day last week while he was in the midst of his cups? With three of their fellow citizens lying dead, this was no time for personal affairs.

"You kin have jist as many men as you want, Jake," the judge wheezed. "But remember, you're goin' tuh take th' lead—no hangin' back! And don't forget th' more men you take, the more is goin' to share the reward."

"The reward?" Old Jake's eyes lighted up.

"I plumb forgot tuh mention that before," the judge growled. "Yes, sir, Dick Tatnall, part owner of the Loder, has offered one thousand dollars reward fur th' killer, dead or alive. And of course, if yuh get yore man, the money's bound tuh be divided among th' whole posse equal."

Old Jake seemed suddenly to come to life. Reaching to his belt, he yanked out his pair of big Colts, examining each carefully in turn.

Then, with two long strides, he stood facing the judge.

"If it's jist the same tuh yuh, judge, I don't want no posse at all," he declared loudly. "I reckon such an old-timer as me won't have no trouble landin' any newfangled killer alone and keepin' th' thousand fur himself. Jist how far up the pass was th' hold-up? I've got tuh have some place tuh start pickin' up his trail."

Neither the judge nor the crowd could conceal their surprise at Jake's sudden change of front. For a time they were all completely mystified. And then they remembered about the generous reward.

After all, a thousand dollars must be a tempting sum in Jake's eyes—it was to every one in the crowd, including the judge. And for money many a man had turned a deaf ear to his fears.

But unless Jake's boastings had some grain of truth, what chance did he have of getting the better of such a desperate and deadly bandit alone? And on one thing everybody in Copper Gulch agreed.

And that was, whatever his degree of courage and gun-fighting ability might be, old Jake was no fool. And that only added to the wonder of the crowd.

"But—but you'd better take a couple of th' boys along with you," the judge stammered, taken aback at Jake's sudden display of nerve. "If you should be th' old blowhouse some of 'em around here think, it 'll be nothin' short of murder tuh let yuh tackle that devil alone."

Jake brushed past the judge to the door and paused on the threshold.

"Some of them tinhorns around here's been doubtin' my words long enough!" he declared gruffly. "And I'm goin' tuh give 'em an eyeful 'fore I gets through. I'm goin' tuh find that killer and put him clean out of business, jist by myself. Again I asks yuh, where was th' place?"

"Right opposite Split Rocks, 'bout halfway up th' pass," the judge replied. "But yuh better let me send along a couple of th' boys—it's no job fur a loner."

But old Jake was gone.

II.

For the next few minutes arguments waxed loud and strong in the Lucky Strike Saloon. While old Jake's friends were jubilant over the courage he had finally displayed,. they were by no means confident of the outcome of the affair if their hero should run into his man.

Any gunman who could down Cherokee Joe and Sam Saxe single-handed was certainly a party to be reckoned with, notwithstanding all of Jake's exploits along the Rio Grande. As for Jake's enemies, they were very positive in their assertions that old Jake would take good care to keep out

of reach of the bandit's guns, thousand or no thousand, and that his dramatic departure was just another one of his bluffs.

But the uncertainty on both sides speedily brought things to a climax. It needed only a mild remark by a shriveled old prospector as to the lack of wisdom in the whole procedure to bring Judge Wilson into action.

"You're right, Silas!" the judge agreed. "It does seem we've all gone plumb out of our heads over this bragging business—thinkin' more about showin' Jake up than catchin' our man. And again, if Jake's really what he says he is, 'tain't exactly fair not tuh give him some help—not to mention how that killer will get clean away if Jake's layin' down on th' job. We'd better all sneak up th' pass and see what's bein' pulled off. Come!"

No further invitation was needed to move the excited mob from the confines of the Lucky Strike. They bolted for the door, two and three abreast, and once outside carefully inspected their weapons as they followed the judge down Copper Gulch's dusty main street, utterly devoid of curbs and pavements, to the outskirts of the town.

Here they fell into single file and hastened up a well beaten trail leading through the foothills to the north.

Finally coming to the spot of the crime, a heavily brushed point in a footpath running up a narrow, rocky ravine, Judge Wilson called a halt. After the judge had explained the position of the bodies when found, the crowd scattered in all directions, looking for the tracks of either the killer or old Jake.

It was but the matter of a few moments before one of the party, searching ahead, caught sight of Jake's footprints in a strip of loose, powdered quartz, a hundred yards or so up the path.

"Jake's headed up this way all right!" he called to the rest. "I'm sure of it, 'cause he's the only one around here what wears such high heels on his boots. Looks like he meant what he said."

"Keep right after them tracks, Tom!" Judge Wilson called back. "We'll come sneakin' right along at yore heels."

And for the next half hour the long line of patrons of the Lucky Strike followed Tom up the slippery, winding trail, single file, until their leader halted at the base of a large bowlder, from which the path took a downward trend.

"We're 'most on to Roaring River now!" Tom announced. "It's just down at th' bottom of this next little valley—less than a half mile more. And old Jake's keepin' on, all right—I kin see a couple of his prints right ahead. I guess we'll—"

Tom suddenly lost his footing on a loose rock and down he went in a heap while the rock rolled down the path in the direction of Roaring River, smashing against the bowlders on the right until it caromed off into a deep gully on the other side with a loud thud.

"Careful thar, Tom!" Judge Wilson cautioned as Tom got to his feet, rubbing his elbow and grinning from ear to ear. "Noises like that travel somethin' terrible in a ravine—maybe it spoilt our whole plan. Yuh cain't tell how near that killer might be!"

"Sorry, judge," Tom whined. "Maybe you want somebody else tuh take th' lead?"

"Naw, go right on—you're the best trailer we've got!" the judge growled stiffly.

The column moved along, now carefully watching their footing on the steep downgrade which was, in a measure, harder than climbing up. Suddenly, every man halted with wide-open eyes and gazed ahead in alarm.

Two shots, fired in rapid succession, echoed through the ravine, their loudness proclaiming they had been fired from a point not far distant!

"Quick, boys!" the judge ordered. "Git down thar—thar's somethin' up!"

And down the trail the group hurried, jostling and sliding into each other in their haste.

But just before they reached the swift flowing waters of Roaring River, old Jake appeared in the path in front of them, holding a crumpled, faded, black hat in his hand!

"I got him!" he announced evenly. "That fellow won't trouble no paymasters no more!"

"Yuh got him!" the judge ejaculated. "Where? How?"

"Right down at th' edge of th' river while he was tryin' tuh figure out some way tuh get across. He was standin' out on a big rock when I nailed him 'fore he could draw. I wasn't takin' no chances on a devil like him—not even me!"

"But his body—where is it? And who is he?" the judge persisted.

Jake shrugged his shoulders.

"Yore guess is jist as good as mine! His body must be some place down th' river by this time, 'cause when I plugged him, he jist toppled off that rock and sank out of sight. And thar was no fishin' him out, either, 'cause th' water was too swift and deep. But I did manage to catch his hat with a long stick by chasin' down th' bank of th' stream fur a piece."

Jake held up the faded black hat which he was carrying in his hand.

"And as to who he was—I never laid eyes on the fellow before. He was a nasty looking cuss with a big scar on one side of his smooth face and had a big, blue handkerchief tied around his neck and had a black poncho strapped on his back."

Some of the members of the posse exchanged swift, meaning glances and a scowl broke out on Judge Wilson's ruddy face.

"A fine cock and bull story tuh hand us!" the judge sneered. "What do yuh take us fellows fur, anyhow—a bunch of dumb half-breeds?"

"But here's his hat," Jake returned. "Yuh kin see it for yourself!"

"What's a hat, anyway?" the judge snapped. "With those Loder fellows usin' this trail, like as not one of 'em lost it some time. And an old bluff like you would be jist cute enough tuh pick it up and try tuh palm it off as belongin' tuh yore man. But yuh cain't fool me with such stuff!"

"Not this hat, judge!" Jake disputed sharply. "This here head-piece don't belong tuh any of th' Loder boys. Not by a damn sight!"

"Why not?" the judge roared. "It looks like a right ordinary kind."

"If yuh had half th' brains a man in yore position s'posed tuh have, you'd soon see, you old fool!" Jake flashed back. "Snake out that leather hatband what was found near th' killin's and show these folks what thinks you're a little Lord God Almighty jist how blamed dumb yuh are!"

There was a tone of confidence and authority in old Jake's voice that caused the judge to reach hastily into his coat pocket, quickly bringing the braided leather hatband to view.

Old Jake snatched it from his hand unceremoniously and handed it, together with the faded black hat, to the nearest member of the posse.

"If you'll jist notice th' part of th' hat what ain't faded so much 'fore you put th' band back in place, you'll see what I mean," Jake drawled.

"By darn, Jake's right!" the fellow exclaimed, after he had fitted the band back on the hat. "It covers all the blacker part to a hair's breadth of an inch—saw-tooth edges and all. Thar's no mistakin' but what this is the hat that went with this band! The way them rough edges meets together proves that for certain!"

"Let's see!" the judge demanded testily, jerking the hat from the fellow's hand and examining it carefully.

"What do you find, judge?" some one asked after the judge had completed his inspection.

"They—they go together all right," he choked. "But don't think Jake's so darn smart—he's th' only one what got a good look at th' hat before. I'd got wise jist th' same as him if I'd had the chance." The judge turned to Jake. "Sorry I spoke so quick, but at first, it did look awful fishy."

Jake simply nodded.

"Like as not the body will show up in Drumhead Dam 'fore a great while," some one spoke up. "Roaring River empties in thar, 'bout a hundred miles down."

"Might get caught in the rocks along the bottom 'fore it gets thar," another opined. "Can't never tell!"

"What good's th' body anyhow?" Jake growled. "Does any of yuh think th' killer's ever goin' tuh show up alive, after me gettin' two cracks at him at less than fifty yards and knockin' him clean off his pins into that stream? Why a man what wasn't even wounded couldn't live in that wild water ten seconds—the rocks in them rapids would dash his brains out!"

"Of course not, Jake!" one of his supporters agreed. "Thar's no arguin' but what yuh put him out of business fur keeps."

"And I did it myself—don't forgit that!" Jake bawled. "Them one thousand iron men will come in mighty handy tuh me jist now. Let's head fur th' Lucky Strike—I'm gettin' damn dry!"

With Jake strutting proudly in the lead, the posse started along the narrow path, Judge Wilson scratching his head as he trailed on behind as if his path was not altogether free from doubts.

III.

For the next week, Jake's exploit was the main topic of conversation in Copper Gulch. With the refusal of Dick Tatnall, part owner of the Loder mines, to pay the one thousand dollars reward to old Jake until he had conclusive proof of the murderer's death, the town became divided into three factions.

First, there was a large and demonstrative group that held no doubts whatever of the slayer's speedy execution at the hands of old Jake, branding Dick Tatnall as very unfair in withholding the reward. Directly opposed to these was another large but more reticent faction who subtly conveyed their opinion that Jake's exploit was nothing but a brazen hoax from beginning to end, declaring he had chanced to find the slayer's hat and the rest was simply the product of his imaginative mind, aided by two shots in the air from one of his guns.

And acting as a sort of buffer between these two large and more powerful groups was a small clique of inhabitants who, while not altogether doubting Jake's tale, were far from convinced of the slayer's death, pointing out that a slightly wounded man might live through the rocks and rapids of Roaring River until he reached the calmer waters below where he could work his way to shore with comparative ease. These persons contended that Dick Tatnall was justified in withholding the reward until the body was found.

During this time, old Jake made the most of his doubtful honors by loafing in the Lucky Strike saloon, freely accepting the treats tendered by his admirers, in turn for which he gave graphic accounts of his exploit. Each day, carefully selecting a period when no drinks were forthcoming, Jake would leave the barroom long enough to find Dick Tatnall and plead for the reward. But Tatnall was obdurate in his condition that the body must first be found.

On one of these visits, Jake encountered Bill Simpson, the new paymaster of the Loder mines, who very forcibly expressed his opinion that Jake was nothing but a tipsy old bluff and that the murderer was still at large. Old Jake flew into a violent rage and after

criticizing Mr. Tatnall very severely for selecting a new paymaster of such low mental perception, retraced his steps to the Lucky Strike.

And following Jake's narration of the episode to the bartender which was repeated by the latter with many variations, a fear arose in the minds of Jake's doubters that the murderer was not only still at large but lurking near by, waiting for another opportunity to seize the Loder pay money. But Jake and his friends only laughed at this, declaring these pessimistic unbelievers to be worse than nervous old women.

Even Simpson, the new paymaster, did not take their warnings seriously, for while believing the bandit to be at large, he scorned any suggestion that the fellow might have the nerve to repeat the attempt, thinking the bandit was well content to make his escape to far remote parts. And even if he should be wrong, Bill Simpson, with his pair of carefully picked bodyguards, could see no cause for undue alarm, declaring that only sheer carelessness had caused his predecessor's death.

But as to who was right and who was wrong, Copper Gulch did not have long to wait to see.

It was on the next Loder pay day that one of Bill Simpson's bodyguards, bleeding from a wound in the shoulder, rushed into town, proclaiming that another holdup had taken place.

Between his gasps for breath, he told the startled street loungers the story—how the paymaster's party of three had been held up in the pass by a lone, masked man, Simpson killed by a shot through the head, and the pay money carried away by the bandit into a near-by cave, near the mouth of which Simpson's other attendant, uninjured, remained on guard to prevent the robber's escape.

Giving explicit directions, the wounded man implored them to send a posse with all haste lest the bandit should get the best of his partner, the other bodyguard, and escape with the spoils. And to the satisfaction of most of his listeners, the bleeding guard declared that the robber must be the same man who had committed the triple murder two weeks before—that he had a blue handkerchief tied over his face, wore a long black poncho, and had a blue star tattooed on the upper part of his bare left arm.

As most of the crowd happened to be belittlers of Jake's late exploit, they accepted the wounded man's assertion with extreme gratification and were loud in their condemnation of old Jake. Had it not been for his boasting and lying, they declared, the bandit might have been apprehended at the time of the first holdup, and Bill Simpson would not have met his tragic death.

In this state of mind the hastily recruited posse hurried up the pass, several of their members being thoughtful enough to first secure a stout rope and a miner's torch. And the sight of Simpson's dead body, lying at a point less than a half mile beyond the scene of the triple tragedy two weeks before, did not tend to appease their anger toward old Jake.

It was not long before the posse caught sight of the other guard, crouched behind a large rock, his pair of six-shooters covering the mouth of a cave, some fifty yards away. In a few seconds they were at his side, taking good care to keep under cover of the rocks, and started to ply him with questions.

"Naw, he didn't get away!" the guard replied in a positive tone. "I've been camped right behind this rock every minute since he dug into th' cave—almost nailed him, in fact, just as he was jumpin' in, only I shot a hair too high. He's still in thar!"

"Who's goin' in after him?" one of the crowd groaned. "There ain't room for more than one at th' start-off—the hole's right small. And thar's no tellin' how fur into th' rocks it runs that way—don't reckon thar's any one in the bunch what's ever been in."

The posse glanced at one another sheepishly, but not a voice answered. Not a single one relished the idea of crawling into that small, dark opening, knowing that somewhere inside was a heavily armed desperado who meant to sell his life dearly. A tense silence fell upon the crowd.

In the space of a few seconds, the tension was broken by the sound of footsteps coming up the pass. All eyes turned to behold Judge Wilson puffing up the path, his ten-gallon hat in his hand and a large, red handkerchief mopping his face.

The posse shifted about uneasily as they waited for the judge to draw up.

"Been followin' right on you fellows' heels," the judge panted. "Heard about th' holdup jist after yuh pulled out. Any truth 'bout the killer bein' pocketed in a cave? I jist knew that thar Jake Hawkins was lyin' all th' time!"

"Yes, the killer's right in thar, judge!" one of the posse said, pointing to the small opening in the rocky bank of the ravine, and from which they had all taken good care to stand out of line.

"Hain't yuh goin' in tuh get him?" the judge shrieked. "What're ye all standin' here for like a bunch of mumlepegs?"

"How about goin' in yourself, judge?" some one asked. "It don't look any too healthy tuh us."

"That's so—that's so," the judge muttered, scratching his head. "'Pears like we've got tuh wait him out. He can't stay in thar forever!"

At this point the crowd turned at the sound of crunching gravel at their backs and they saw old Jake hurrying up the trail, his red-flanneled arms swinging in unison with his fast moving legs.

"The lying old fool!" the judge rasped. "If it hadn't been for him maybe we'd had that devil what's inside of th' cave 'fore this. When we get through with this job, we oughta run Jake out of town!"

"Right yuh be, judge!" another of the party agreed. "He's tuh blame fur Simpson's death—if it hadn't been fur his yarn we'd 'a' kept on lookin' till we got that killer. But runnin' out of town's too easy fur a feller what obstructs th' law—we oughta hang both old Jake and th' killer on th' same rope. That's my sentiments! They both had a hand in Simpson's cashin' out—the killer with his guns and old Jake throwin' us off th' killer's trail with his lyin' tongue."

"That's jist th' way I size it up!" another opponent of old Jake broke out. "When he gits up here whare we kin lay our hands on him, I'm fur stringin' Jake up. If it hadn't been fur th' lyin' old bluff, Simpson wouldn't be dead now—we'd 'a' had that killer long ago or chased him clean out of these parts."

"Git th' rope ready!" a big, red-headed fellow wheezed. "When Jake gits up here, couple of us 'll grab him right swift. That big tree up thar a piece 'll do mighty well."

"But you cain't do that, boys!" the judge protested, holding up his hands. "Thar hain't no law what makes lyin' punishable with death. And that's all Jake's really done!"

"Law or no law, Jake's goin' tuh swing!" the red-headed fellow flashed back. "We've listened tuh yuh and yore blamed law long enough—that's how th' killer came tuh get away in th' first place! Nobody what had any sense would ever have thought of appointin' an old liar like Jake tuh fill th' sheriff's shoes!"

The judge's face flushed, but his eyes flashed. "I won't stand fur anything what ain't lawful! Remember, I'm th' judge of—"

"Better keep quiet and let us fellows handle this, judge!" some one cut in.

"Yes—and not so loud!" another whispered. "Jake's gittin' mighty close. Git ready tuh grab him!"

Judge Wilson started to break out

afresh, when somebody else seized him by the collar and yanked him back into the crowd, clapping a hand over his mouth.

By this time Jake had drawn near the posse and was surveying them with scornful eyes.

"What's this bull I hear 'bout th' killer comin' back tuh life and pullin' off another job?" he blazed, striding straight into the crowd. "It can't be!"

"It's jist as sartain as I am of what is comin' tuh yuh, yuh lyin' old brag!" the red-headed fellow shouted, grabbing Jake by the arm while two of the others pinned him from the opposite side. "The rope, boys!"

Jake's pale blue eyes gave an amazed stare. "You're not meanin' tuh string me up! What fur?"

"Yuh old liar!" the red-head rasped. "Yuh said yuh killed th' devil what pulled off that first holdup and stopped us fellows from followin' up his trail. And he's right in that thar cave now!"

"Can't be—can't be," Jake sputtered. "I nailed him dead, I'm tellin' yuh. Let me go!"

"Since Jake's so sure he ain't in thar, let him go in and see! That 'd be a little more lawful than th' rope!" The hand had been removed from Judge Wilson's mouth.

The red-headed fellow glanced sharply into the back of the crowd.

"Not a bad idea, judge! Can't see any harm in givin' Jake his choice." He turned to his captive. "What do yuh say—into th' cave, or th' rope?"

Old Jake stared square into his questioner's eyes.

"Why, into th' cave, of course—a foolish thing tuh ask an old-timer like me what's not scared of no man's guns. Besides, he can't be in thar, I'm tellin' yuh. I nailed him as dead as I did Moctezuma Joe!"

Murmurs of surprise arose from the mob. There was hardly a man in the posse but what had expected to see Jake beg and cringe.

But the old man stood erect between his captors, gazing complacently at the mouth of the cave, easily the most composed figure in the crowd.

Had they misjudged old Jake, after all?

"No tricks, Jake!" the red-headed one cautioned, letting go of his captive's arm. "Remember, we're goin' tuh keep yuh covered every foot of th' way tuh th' mouth of th' cave."

"Who do you folks think you're dealin' with—a yellow belly like yourselves?" Jake spouted, shaking himself loose from the two that held his other arm. "Don't git nervous now when I reaches fur my shootin' irons—I jist wants to give 'em th' once-over tuh be sure they're in good shootin' order 'fore I crawls into that cave. Of course I knows th' feller what killed Bryden can't be inside, but I might run into a grizzly b'ar or some wild animal such as that."

He pulled out his guns, one by one, examining each carefully with an expression of pride. Once satisfied they were in working order, he replaced them in their holsters and stood facing the crowd.

"And now fur th' benefit of some of yuh low-down tinhorns what hasn't got th' guts tuh do anything but knock," Jake announced dramatically, with a flourish of his hand, "I'm goin' to wade right into that cave and prove tuh yuh what I said 'bout landin' that killer was the truth—that I nailed him dead, down at Roaring River, days ago."

"But that's somebody in thar, sure, Jake!" a member of the posse warned. "And it hain't no grizzly b'ar either. Dugan, Simpson's other guard here, saw him go in."

"Might be somebody, but not th' killer I nailed down at Roaring River," Jake grunted. "We'll soon see."

And while the crowd stared with bulging eyes, Jake started briskly across the rock-strewn ground to the mouth of the cave, drawing out his big

Colts on the way. Coming to the opening, he never turned to look back at the posse, but plunged right in.

The rest, encouraged by Jake's boldness, moved up near the mouth of the cave and strained their ears. But the only sounds they could catch were the scraping and slipping of Jake's hobnailed boots, growing fainter and fainter as they listened.

"We had him wrong, boys!" Judge Wilson muttered hoarsely. "After just what we seen old Jake do, with our own eyes, we can't never call him an old bluff no more. Maybe he's a little windy, perhaps, but he's game tuh th' core. I never seen such cold-blooded nerve! And that killer's in thar somewheres—jist as sure as you're born!"

"Yuh says it right, judge," another moaned. "We all figured out old Jake for a big blow what didn't have any real nerve at all, but none of us ever had a suspicion he was such a fool—tuh think he'd crawl right into that killer's guns! Looks like we were all twisted up—Jake's the dumbest but nerviest man alive."

"It wasn't right fur us tuh send him in thar, even if he was so blamed anxious to go," another growled. "That killer's bound—"

Two loud reports rang out from the mouth of the cavern, followed by a heavy thud.

The crowd outside stared at each other, wild eyed.

"Wonder which got that—poor old Jake or th' killer?" the judge groaned.

"Lord knows!" another whined. "But if it wasn't Jake, he oughta be comin' out soon."

They waited for what seemed an eternity, but Jake did not appear, nor could they catch the faintest sound.

"Maybe they got each other!" some one finally suggested. "Thar was two shots, one fur each man."

The red-headed fellow sprang toward the opening. "We can't wait all week tuh find out. I'm goin' tuh take a chance. Who's got th' torch?"

The miner's torch quickly passed through the crowd until it reached the red-headed fellow's extended palm. He lighted it and held it in his left hand, while his right snatched a large Colt from his belt. Then he proceeded cautiously into the cave while the rest held their breath.

In a short time the red head came crawling out of the cave, a mixture of horror and surprise written on his freckled face.

"Somethin' mighty strange has happened inside!" he gasped. "A few of yuh fellows come in—I need some help."

Paying no attention to the many questions hurled at him, the red head turned and started back into the cave, with a few of the bolder members of the posse following close behind.

With the light of their leader's torch the party soon emerged from the narrow passageway into a large, high-walled cavern which seemed to extend far into the darkness beyond. The red head hastened down this subterranean chamber, pausing abruptly before an indiscernible mass pinned between a large rock and the wall of the cave.

"It's Jake—he got caught somehow with a fallin' rock!" he whispered softly, lowering his torch until it disclosed a pair of human legs protruding from underneath the large rock. "But I can't find th' other feller anywheres around. He must be hidin' farther in. All of you give me a lift tuh move this rock till we see if thar's any life left in th' old man. Then we'll dig that other feller out."

Willing hands soon rolled the large rock to one side, bringing Jake's battered body to view. The old man's gray hair was colored with blood, but he still clutched a six-shooter in each hand. And by the intermittent movement of his flannel-covered chest, they saw that life was not totally extinct.

Quickly examining Jake's guns, they perceived he had fired both shots.

"Th' bang of his own shooters must have loosened a rock above him," the red head muttered. "In a cooped-up place like this th' jarrin' from a shot is somethin' terrible. I wonder if Jake nailed his man—if he's lyin' dead somewheres farther in? But we've got tuh get Jake out of here quick—th' air is awful bad."

It was but the work of a couple of minutes to carry Jake out of the cave into the fresh outside air and hastily turn him over to the care of the anxious crowd.

Then the red head led his little party back into the cavern to find the bandit who had taken refuge somewhere inside.

After they came to the spot where they had found old Jake they proceeded with the utmost caution, the hammers of their guns cocked back, ready to fire at the slightest movement or sound.

But they continued into the cavern, which, much to their surprise, extended for more than two hundred yards, without their progress being interrupted. Finally coming to a wall of smooth rock, which seemed to mark the end of the cave, one of the party caught a faint ray of light, over in a small pocket to the left.

Hastening to this point, they found an opening leading into a small gully outside, large enough for a man to crawl through.

"That's the answer!" the red-headed leader exclaimed. "Th' killer has made his get-away through that thar hole! And it don't look like Jake winged him at all, 'cause I can't see a drop of blood anywheres around. But what's this?"

The leader dived into a crevice in the rocks and brought out a black rubber poncho, holding it up to his companions' gaze.

"It's the killer's poncho!" one of the party exclaimed. "See if thar's anything else in thar."

The red head bent over the crevice again, throwing out a pair of well-worn moccasins, a torch, a jug of water, and a box of hardtack in turn.

"This cave was th' killer's hang-out—sure as you're born!" another asserted. "He knew he could make his get-away through this here hole when he rushed in. And we thought we had him trapped!"

"Let's crawl outside and take a squint," the red-headed leader suggested.

One by one the little party crawled through the small opening into the gully outside, their eyes alert and their guns in their hands.

But, as they had expected, the killer was not to be seen.

"I'll go back and get th' rest of th' boys—I've got th' torch," the red head announced. "You fellows nose around a bit an' try tuh pick up th' killer's trail till we show up."

And the next instant he climbed back into the cave, hastening to the crowd waiting at the mouth.

When the red-headed fellow bobbed out from the mouth of the cave he found the crowd bending over Jake, trying to restore him to consciousness.

It was at this point that Jake first opened his eyes, gazing dimly at the throng.

"Buck up, old-timer!" Judge Wilson cried. "You're goin' tuh pull through."

Jake gave a sickly grin. "Nope, judge, I'm a goner—I'm slippin' fast. That rock came right down on my back as I was lettin' go with my guns. My chest feels all crushed."

"Pull off his shirt, yuh lunk-heads, and see how he's hurt!" the red head shouted as he made his way through the crowd.

Several sprung to Judge Wilson's assistance and gently removed Jake's red flannel shirt. As the last sleeve was stripped from the old man's limp figure a gasp of amazement escaped from the crowd.

There, halfway above the elbow, on Jake's bare left arm was tattooed a large blue star!

Judge Wilson fairly leaped over the prostrate Jake and glared into his dim eyes.

"Yuh—the killer?" he shouted. "Speak, man, speak!"

Even as death was settling over old Jake, his lips again settled in scorn.

"Yuh—yuh thought I was an old bluff, didn't yuh?" he wheezed. "But yuh see I hain't. If—if I hadn't fired them two shots in—in th' cave, tuh make believe I'd—I'd chased th' killer out th' back way, you fools would—would be buffaloed yet. I was reckonin' on leadin' yuh in afterward and—and showin' yuh th' way he got out. But I wasn't figurin' on jarrin' loose any rocks. And that's what got me."

"But how come yuh walked up th' trail, after we'd all got here?" the judge asked, rubbing his hands nervously.

Old Jake tried to chuckle. "That was easy. I'd only tuh crawl out—out of that hole in—in th' back, walk down that—that gully a piece, bury th' money near a spring down thar, and—and cut over tuh th' trail, 'bout a quarter mile down.

"I figured that would be a heap safer than—than tryin' tuh make a quick get-away, 'cause—'cause yuh fellers 'd never think tuh look fur—fur th' killer right in yore own crowd. And yuh wouldn't know it yet if—if I hadn't been fool enough tuh—tuh take off my shirt and hide it in th'—th' brush 'fore I pulled off both jobs. I thought my red sleeves might—might be a dead give-away as—as I stuck my arms through th' poncho while—while I used my guns."

"The old devil!" some one growled.

"And that hat—th' hat with th' funny leather band—that was rich!" old Jake rambled on. "That hat I brought all th' way from th' Rio Grande, but—but kept it out of sight in—in th' cave. I dug in and got it 'fore—'fore I fired them two shots in th' air, when yuh fellers was—was right behind—down Roaring River way."

"I always thought thar was somethin' queer about that hat!" Judge Wilson choked.

Jake's eyes started to close.

"Some of them tinhorns didn't—didn't believe I'd knocked off Moctezuma Joe," he murmured in the manner of one talking to himself. "But I did, all right—back in them days along th' Rio Grande. But I wasn't tellin' them—them tinhorns I plugged him cold so's—so's I could become th' leader of his band.

"Not much! It wouldn't do fur them tuh—tuh know that. Nor how afterwards, when I led them greasers across th' river fur—fur nice fat cattle, they called me th' Killer of th' Rio Grande. That day down—down in Presidio when—when I shot it out with—with th' sheriff and—and—"

Judge Wilson bent lower and placed his ear on Jake's chest.

"He's dead, boys!" the judge mumbled. "And I guess he wasn't stringin' us with his yarns at that—only twisted 'em around a bit."

THE END

When the West was young, and passions strong, an easy-going gunslinger is changed to an agent of vengeance. Read

ROPE NECKTIES

By JOHN WILSTACH

a stirring serial, whose first installment appears next week.

Damming Hairpin Cañon

By C. C. WADDELL

Author of "Somewhere in Nevada," "Adventure's Price," etc.

When the sheriff is crooked and a lady is in distress, what can a man accustomed only to riding bucking flivvers do?

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

MOLLY TODD, daughter of a miner who struck it rich, wants to dam Hairpin Cañon and irrigate the mined-out, arid, unproductive region in Los Chicos County, New Mexico, where her father made his pile. Hairpin Cañon, lying wholly in Bridger County except for one bend jutting into Los Chicos, has the only water available. The county commissioners, refused their graft, work against her. By pledging herself to take up the entire bond issue required, Molly puts her proposition through, only to find the county surveyor has miscalculated the amount of water available and an auxiliary pumping plant is necessary. The additional cost seems likely to kill the entire project. Meanwhile the Bridgerites oppose an invasion of what they consider their water rights, and the two counties engage in a civil war, put down by State troops, in which the surveyor is killed and much bad blood fomented. Norman Rich, mechanical expert and machinery salesman, works out a plan to solve the pumping problem and makes a bid he is sure will land the contract. Dick Crawford, star salesman for Rich's former employers, Blair & Co., makes a deal with the commissioners, and, in spite of the aid of Molly Todd, Norman is flimflammed out of the contract. Rich discovers that the dam dimensions and its direction have been changed so that Bridger County alone will profit from the work paid for by Los Chicos. This and other indications of graft decide him to remain and fight the thing through with Molly, in spite of a warning from one of the commissioners to leave. Before he can do anything, however, he receives word from his company that he is fired.

CHAPTER VI.

"I WANT YOU!"

NORMAN dropped with a jolt from the fool's paradise into which he had boosted himself.

He was facing cold, gray reality now, instead of those airy dreams in which he had been indulging. The swift transition dazed him.

Unconsciously he let the message slip from his fingers and flutter to the floor. He did not stoop to recover it, but reached instead for the one he had been about to send, and crumpling it into his pocket, lurched blindly for the door.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 7

Crawford, observing him now, leaned out from the desk where he was sitting, and salvaged the telegram lying on the floor. He read it, then nodded to the clerk at the window.

"Mr. Rich must have dropped this," he said, folding the slip and tucking it away. "I'll just keep it in case he may want it, and hand it to him when I see him at the hotel."

Then he tore up the sheet over which he had been laboring, and, taking a new blank, scribbled hurriedly, and with but little reflection, a brief message, and handed it in to be filed.

Meanwhile, Norman had paused about half a block down the street to try and pull himself together, and mentally got his bearings.

So far, the one fact that he had been able to take into his consciousness was that he was fired. No sugar-coating about it this time. No suggestion that his resignation would be acceptable. He had simply been kicked out as a failure. That hurt.

Of course, it was no more than he should have expected. Really, there was nothing else for the house to do. They had been patient, more than patient with him. And he had assured them so positively, that there couldn't be a chance of a slip-up on this Los Chicos award. Then to receive his notification that it had gone to Blair & Co. It was a wonder that they hadn't made their dismissal of him even more terse and brutal than it was.

Yes, it was no more than was coming to him. And yet he had somehow kidded himself into the conviction that he was going to be let stay on there and redeem himself by exposing the dark machinations of Crawford and the corrupt commissioners, and winning out in the end.

It had seemed to him such an eminently proper finale to the story, with the hero emerging triumphant, and his sinister foes routed and decisively beaten, that he still could hardly believe it was not to be.

The facts, though, stared him in the face, and bluntly told him: "Not a chance!"

Without salary, prospects, or any way of earning a dollar, he could not camp down at Los Chicos for an indefinite stay, or on so doubtful a gamble as that of showing up these powerful and well-entrenched rascals and making them disgorge.

A wealthy moralist would have argued no doubt that it was his civic duty to bring the grafters to justice, no matter at what sacrifice to himself. But Norman knew, if he expected to keep on eating, he would have to be out hustling for another job.

No, there was no help for it. He would have to leave Crawford and the commissioners riding high, wide and handsome, and sneak away licked and humiliated, an object for their contemptuous derision. That hurt his pride, too.

And he would have to let Molly Todd make her plucky fight alone. Any idea of that "shoulder to shoulder" business was over now. She would probably despise him as a coward and a quitter. Gosh! That hurt worst of all.

As he stood there dejectedly considering the situation, the clock in the courthouse cupola—that same clock which had rung the knell on his hopes at noon—boomed six slow strokes, and at the same time, the bus from the hotel rattled past him on its way to the railroad station.

The two circumstances recalled Norman to himself with a start. Evidently, the branch was clear again from the wreck. That bus was taking passengers down to the six fifteen, the last train out of Rio Rita that night.

If he hustled, he could just make it; and arriving at Los Chicos Junction, could catch the midnight train on the main line out for the East. Otherwise, he would have to stay over in Rio Rita until eleven o'clock the next day, and through poor connections

would lose two days in getting to Chicago.

No reason on earth for him to stay over. Much better for him to slip quietly away now, and start on a clean slate, forgetting that such a dump as Los Chicos County ever existed. Only—that would mean leaving, without again seeing Molly Todd.

Well, common sense advised him, what was the matter with that? Better he should forget her, too. All he got from thinking about her was to keep himself perturbed and upset.

But when did common sense ever win in an argument with a young man regarding a girl?

It struck Norman all of a sudden, that even if it did make him two days late in reaching Chicago, and although he was prevented from joining her in her battle against the grafters, it yet would never do for him to leave Rio Rita without acquainting her with the rather significant discoveries he had made at the dam that afternoon. That would be only a proper return for the assistance she had rendered to him.

A dilapidated looking vehicle stood across the street, with a sign "For hire," hung on the side of it, and a barefooted Mexican sleeping on the front seat.

Norman went over to it, and prodding the man into wakefulness, asked him if he knew where Miss Molly Todd lived.

"Mees Mollitod?" The fellow grinned, flashing a row of white teeth. "*Si, señor.* Ev'r'body know zat. Joomp een."

"How far is it?" questioned Norman cautiously. It did not seem to him as if the antiquated car could hold together for more than a mile or two.

"'Ow far? Oh, joost a step. We start; we zere."

It wasn't quite like that, but it was almost so, as Norman discovered after he somewhat hesitatingly took the chance.

They started, and in effect they were there, although the distance was nearly twenty miles, and the road about as terrifying as can well be imagined—a mere rough, mountain trail that continually skirted the edge of dizzy gorges and clung narrowly to the side of towering cliffs.

The Jehu—that Mexican deserved the name if any driver ever did—shot away with a jerk that sent Norman careening back against the cushions, and deaf to all protests of his badly scared passenger, never slackened speed for an instant until they arrived at their destination.

Not alone that, but he paid only the most casual attention to the wheel, using his hands for the most part to gesture with as an adjunct to the conversation he kept turning about to carry on, or else employing them in the rolling and lighting of a steady succession of cigarettes.

Uphill and down hill they raced, around hair-raising curves, with the crazy old ark rattling and groaning and threatening every moment to collapse. All the time around them were only the bald peaks and yawning valleys of a country as dead and barren and desolate as a landscape in the moon.

Then suddenly the granite cliffs parted like a gateway; and they swept between into a wide, spreading park of gracious green, with a big house like a feudal castle set in the middle of it—the home of Molly Todd, built by her father, Dave Todd, the pioneer, in the days of his mining prosperity.

"We are zere!" announced the driver proudly, as he circled the drive leading up to the house with an added burst of speed, and stopped short before the front door.

Shaken and weak as a rag from the ordeal he had been through, Norman crawled out and staggered up the steps to the entrance.

An ultra-correct butler, with gray side-whiskers, opened the door in answer to his ring, and eyed Norman's dusty and rumpled appearance with dis-

dain, seeming to take supercilious note of every fleck of clay or concrete that clung to his clothing as a result of his visit to the dam excavation that afternoon.

"Will you please tell Miss Todd that Mr. Rich would like to see her on a matter of considerable importance?"

The butler suspiciously ushered him inside, and motioned him to a seat in a small reception room at the right of the hall, left him.

Norman, however, strolled over to the window, and stood looking out.

It was certainly a wonderful location that the old miner had chosen for this aerie of his, high up on the slope of a lofty mountain.

Off in every direction, as far as the eye could reach, lay tumbled peaks rising in fantastic shapes against the sunset sky, like the billows of an angry sea. It was a prospect indescribably wild and stark. But here close at hand the rugged, sterile country had been subdued by man to form a cultivated estate.

Money must have been spent lavishly, Norman knew, to create on that arid shelf of land the grassy lawns that sloped away before him, the orchards and gardens, and to build in this remote spot a stately habitation, furnished with every modern convenience, even to an English butler.

Water was the secret of it, of course —that unfailing, artesian well, which Todd when he chose this location as a home had first put in, so as to make it possible as a living place.

No wonder, then, that Molly felt so deeply on the subject of irrigation; or that, with this miracle daily before her eyes, she yearned to transform the ugly, savage country all about her into the same sort of a garden spot.

A sudden gleam of light from a window in the northern wing of the big house just across from him drew Norman's glance in that direction. He saw beyond the drawn curtains a handsome dining room with a rather elaborately appointed table in it. Evidently dinner was just about to be served.

The sight recalled Norman to the fact that food had not passed his lips all that day. He had hurried away from the junction on the relief train without even so much as a cup of coffee; and ever since he had been so keyed up with excitement, so caught in the web of thronging events, that he had never once thought of his stomach.

But now hunger swept over him like a tide. Molly would, of course, invite him to take dinner with her; and he wondered, as he gazed longingly at that dinner table, if he would be able in his famished state to show decent restraint in her presence.

A discreet cough from the doorway behind him apprised him of the return of the butler, and he turned eagerly in anticipation of the expected invitation.

But there was no touch of hospitality in the butler's frozen face.

"Miss Todd is sorry," he said stiffly, "but she is deeply engaged at present, and hopes you will excuse her."

"Eh?" Norman was even more stunned than he had been at the receipt of the telegram from the firm.

The butler repeated his message even more icily than before.

"Oh, all right." Norman gulped groggily, and moved crestfallen for the door.

He didn't know what to think. It struck him that probably the butler had reported that he looked like a tramp, and having other guests to dinner, she had turned him down on account of his appearance.

But that didn't seem like Molly Todd. Anyhow, he hadn't asked her to feed him. All he had asked was to see her, and she could easily have granted that without disturbing any other arrangements she might have on hand.

He wasn't so much angry for the moment as he was puzzled, chagrined, crushed. Then hot resentment flamed

up in him. What right had she to treat him so, after the encouragement she had given him?

But—a bitter suggestion came to him—was she really sincere in those heartening words she had spoken to him in front of the courthouse? More likely, as he had half-suspected at the time, she was simply letting him down easy.

He had shown himself so futile, so inept, such a perfect boob, that she hadn't felt it worth while to betray her irritation; just gave the poor halfwit a jollying pat, and let him go his way.

"Good Lord!" he thought with withering self-abasement. "Why shouldn't she? About all she has ever seen me do is to make funny falls and flop around in the dust at her feet."

The flare of anger which had brought his head up for a second died away, and as the butler held the door for him with the manner of one shooting out a stray alley-cat he slunk by with shamed, downcast eyes.

Into his dilapidated, waiting hack he climbed.

"Get me back to town as quick as you can make it," he growled.

He didn't care much now whether they crashed over one of those precipices on the road or not. The mortifying experience through which he had just passed could, as he saw it, mean only one thing: Molly Todd had definitely and decisively given him the gate. And, after that, what else mattered?

The driver obligingly started off in a manner that seemed likely to gratify Norman's suicidal ambitions. But before they got clear of the grounds one of the car's flimsy old tires blew out with a report like a cannon, and they had come to a halt.

"Nev' min', señor!" The driver scrambled out cheerfully and began working on the spare. "We make eet all right. I feex him queeck.

"Sí, sí, we make eet all right," he repeated, and something in his tone reminded Norman of Molly Todd's confident assurances to him as they raced so recklessly to Rio Rita at noon—assurances which she would certainly have made good if it had not been for that disastrous truck.

No question that she had been eager to aid him then. And remembering that thrilling dash and her other efforts to help him win the contract, Norman could not but feel that it would be an ungrateful and caddish thing—no matter what her attitude toward him now—to go away, keeping the information he possessed.

Since she did not want to see him, he would not intrude upon her again of course. But that did not prevent him from sending her a communication covering the facts.

He beckoned to a man who had sauntered over from the lodgekeeper's house to watch the Mexican work upon the tire, and who was evidently employed upon the estate.

"There's something I failed to tell Miss Todd when I was up to the house," said Norman. "If I put it in a note, can you deliver it for me, and see that it gets into her own hands right away?"

"Sure." The fellow nodded. "I've got to go up to the big house anyhow in about fifteen minutes, and I'll hand it to her myself."

Accordingly Norman began searching among the papers in his pocket for a blank sheet on which to set down his discoveries in regard to the dam. As he did so he came across the draft of that explanatory telegram to his firm which he had not sent.

Why not save time, and simply turn that over to her, came the suggestion. It covered the facts as completely as any statement he could get up, and told her all she needed to know.

Scratching out, therefore, his plea to be retained on the job, and adding only a line to say that he was going away, and wanted to advise her of this intelligence before he left it, he sealed

the sheet in an envelope he happened to have with him, and turned it over to his messenger.

Then, the car being once more in shape to travel by this time, he felt that he could essay with a clear conscience the perils of his driver and the road. Whatever might befall, he was at least absolved from the sins of ingratitude or petty spite. He could face the Recording Angel with a clean bill of health.

Yet, although the return trip was even a bit more hair raising than the one out, and the Mexican a trifle more care-free on the turns, they somehow arrived safely at Rio Rita. Norman, by what he could never regard as other than a miracle, found himself delivered intact at the hotel.

His head still whirling from the dizzy ordeal, he did not notice Crawford as he entered the hotel, until the latter clapped him on the shoulder and called his name.

Norman drew back a little, and stiffened. But when Crawford handed him the message dropped in the telegraph office, and explained how he happened to have it in his possession, his manner of aloofness rather crumbled.

Involuntarily he reddened and winced, expecting the wise-cracker to begin ragging him over his discharge, for the benefit of a group of other traveling men in the hotel office.

But to his surprise, Crawford's manner expressed a decent sympathy.

"Tough luck, old man," he said with a shake of the head. "But what we've all got to expect, if things happen to go wrong. Your turn to-day. Maybe it 'll be mine to-morrow.

"It was on account of losing out on this Los Chicos contract, I suppose?" he wrinkled up his forehead. "Well, I'm sorry to be the indirect cause. But if it hadn't been me, it would have been somebody else. Believe me, Norman, you never had a chance."

"That's been made pretty plain to me by some things I've found out," said Norman significantly.

Crawford shot him a quick glance of question from under his brows, but covered it immediately with a laugh.

"Oh, don't go in for post-mortems, my boy," he advised. "When an award's gone in this game, it's dead. I've never seen any good come yet from rattling the dry bones.

"Way, I always do," he shrugged, "is charge the losses off to experience, and go gunning for the next prospect.

"And by the way," he spoke as if the thought had just occurred to him, "you're looking for a new connection, I fancy? Well, I've heard that there's going to be a mighty good opening with the Devlin Company of Philadelphia.

"If you like, I'll give you a boost to Joe Devlin. He's a good friend of mine.

"And if I was you, too, I wouldn't waste any time writing letters to 'em. I'd hop the rattler, and go right on to Philly, and see 'em in person.

"Listen!" he caught Norman by the arm. "I've got that auto here I came over from the junction with last night. I'd held it, expecting to go back this evening. But I've had a wire from the old man telling me to stick here a few days, and it 'll have to make the return trip empty.

"It's paid for, and you're welcome to use it; and, don't you see, that 'll give you a chance to catch the midnight at the junction, and start East without delay."

Norman was not unfamiliar with the old adage about fearing the Greeks most when they are bearing gifts. He ascribed Crawford's eagerness to get rid of him, however, to a desire to prevent further investigation on his part into the local crookedness. But as he had already decided that he could not afford to stay at Rio Rita and give time to that, he saw no reason why he should not profit by the offer.

But to a certain extent he was mistaken in his diagnosis of the other's motives. Crawford was not rushing him out of town so much because of the irrigation matter, as on account of a telegram he had received from J. P. Blair announcing that he and his daughter were on their way to Rio Rita.

When Norman had seen him in the telegraph office that afternoon, scowling and biting his pen, Crawford had been trying to frame an answer to this message that would stave off the expected visitation. For in spite of his vainglorious boasts to Norman, his influence with both the boss and Gladys was somewhat on the wane, and he was afraid, if they ran into their old favorite, the situation might get worse.

But that telegram of dismissal which he picked up from the floor made things look better for him. That meant, of course, that Norman, having to get out and hunt for a new job, would be unlikely to stay long in Rio Rita, and consequently all that remained for Crawford to do was accelerate the matter.

And, as already shown, he found little difficulty in persuading Norman to do as he wished.

Out to the car they hurried, Crawford urging his companion along with a hand on his arm, while he kept buzzing that there'd be just about time to catch the midnight train at the junction.

But just as Norman had lifted his bag into the car a big man on a foaming horse came tearing up the street, and flinging himself out of the saddle, stepped up beside him.

"Rich, ain't you?" he said, shouldering Crawford out of the way and dropping a hand on Norman's shoulder. "And where are you going, if I may ask?"

"Why—why, to Los Chicos Junction," Norman stammered.

"Oh, no; you ain't," said the big man, tightening his grip on Norman's shoulder, and flipping his coat back to show the butt of a forty-five at his belt. "You are coming with me."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAINS.

NORMAN was so dumfounded at this climax to his day of dumfounding adventures, that he didn't really know whether he was yanked from the car, or got out of his own accord.

With his feet on the ground, however, and feeling himself propelled along by that energetic clutch on his shoulder, he roused to an impulse of resistance.

The memory flashed to his mind of Fenton's black scowl and the unmistakable menace in his tone as he voiced that warning of danger ahead, if Norman persisted in linking himself with "local trouble-makers."

Was this the retaliation of the gang then for that visit he had paid to Molly this evening? They must have been spying on his movements, and have guessed that his purpose was to reveal his discoveries at the dam.

At the suggestion, Norman dug his heels into the earth, and rearing back, endeavored to break the grip which held him captive. But he might as well have tried to withstand the pressure of a locomotive. Wriggle and twist and hold back as he would, he was pushed along just the same.

Crawford, however, had pulled himself together by that time, and seizing the big man by the other arm, served as a brake upon his progress.

"Here," he protested excitedly. "What are you trying to do to my friend?"

But the big man, paying no more heed to him than if he were a yapping cur running alongside, continued to shove Norman on until they came to the battered old hack with its Mexican driver dozing on the box.

"Get in." He jerked his head toward the sorry vehicle.

"I won't!" said Norman desperately.

For answer, the big man simply picked him up and deposited him on the seat.

"Sorry, young feller," he observed amiably. "But I was told to fetch you along with me, and I gotta do it. Orders is orders."

"Orders?" demanded Norman, unable to control a slight quaver in his voice. "Whose orders?"

"Why, Miss Molly's. She wants to see you."

"Oh?" In his relief, Norman brought the word out in a sort of spasmodic gulp.

He recognized the man now, too, as one of those gathered on the courthouse steps when he and Molly had driven up there at noon.

"Oh?" he repeated with more assurance. "Then you must be—er—Captain Davis."

"That's me," the grizzled giant nodded; "but folks around here generally call me just Big Bill. And now, introductions bein' over, let's get started.

"Hi, Manuel!" He poked the driver into wakefulness. "Get a move on you."

But Crawford, who had been dodging from side to side of Big Bill in the effort to get in a word, here managed to make himself heard.

"Seems to me you're taking this high-handed performance pretty tamely, Rich." He bobbed up at the side of the car. "Miss Molly Todd must think she's royalty or something, having people dragged off willy-nilly this way when she wants to see them."

Big Bill brushed him aside as he might an annoying fly.

"Say?" he growled. "How do you break in on this, anyway?"

"I'm a friend of Rich's, and I don't propose to see him put upon. I—"

"A friend? Don't make me laugh. 'Twas you, along with them mangy coyotes at the courthouse, what euchred him out of that contract to-day."

But Crawford sheered quickly away from that point.

"Norman," he appealed sharply, "are you going to let this big bully make you lose out on that Philadelphia chance? What's Los Chicos County to you any more, or anything in it? But if you don't catch the midnight east, you'll—"

Norman gave a start at the reminder. Of course, it was his future he had to consider now. Nothing gained, as Crawford had said, by rattling dry bones.

He lifted a foot out over the side of the hack, and turned to Big Bill.

"Listen," he said. "I'm sorry, but it's quite out of the question for me to go with you. I am leaving for the East to-night. In fact, I ought to be on my way to the junction now."

"But Miss Molly wants to see you," returned Big Bill, as if that settled it.

The reflection came to Norman that she had not been so eager to see him when he had gone to her castle an hour or two before. Probably, she thought it to her advantage now to secure fuller details regarding those changes in the dam.

But why should she consider him at her beck and call? His resentment stirred at the memory of his ignominious dismissal by her English butler.

"Sorry," he repeated stiffly. "Please express my regrets to Miss Todd; but—"

He was interrupted, as he started a dignified descent from the hack, by a huge paw which thrust him unceremoniously back, and held him helpless on the seat.

At the same time, Big Bill gave a low whistle which called his horse up to him.

"Go on home, Jasper," he directed it. "I gotta ride in this gol-dinged old hearse, 'count of this here unruly maverick."

Then, as the horse galloped obedi-

ently away, he swung himself into the hack beside Norman, and ordered the driver to go ahead.

"Do you mean to tell me," gasped Norman, "that you are going to take me against my will—by force?"

"Just that," assented Big Bill nonchalantly. "Miss Molly told me to bring you, and I always aim to do what she says."

"But my train East!" raged Norman. "My chance at that job in Philadelphia! By cripes! If there's any law in New Mexico, I'll make you suffer for this, Davis."

"'Tain't no tougher on you'n 'tis on me, kid." Big Bill leaned back resignedly and lit a cigar. "I'd ruther be hung 'n ride in one of these things. Don't feel at home nowhere but in a saddle.

"Yet, here I am caged up with you in this old box for nigh onto an hour, when, if you'd only been reasonable, I could 'a' took Jasper and made it up over the mountain in less'n fifteen minutes.

"That's why," he explained, "Miss Molly didn't come after you herself. I could make it to town on horseback faster'n she could in the car. And she was afraid you might pull your freight."

Norman, however, paid little heed to these observations. He was engaged in speculating on the chances of jumping from the hack and escaping unhurt, for once they were started, the restraining grip of his captor had been released.

But in view of Manuel's reckless driving, such an attempt would be obvious suicide, and he had to fall back upon mere verbal protests and threats of what he would do when he regained his liberty.

Big Bill only laughed indulgently at his successive tirades.

"Keep your shirt on, kid," he advised. "Keep your shirt on. If you ain't well enough acquainted with Miss Molly to know it yourself, I can tell you that nobody never lost nothing yet doing what she said.

"Now listen to me," he went on. "I couldn't talk out while that snake-in-the-grass salesman was buzzing around, but I can put you wise now that what she wants with you is to give you a job."

"Give me a job?" Norman's head jerked up sharply.

"Sure," nodded Bill. "She seen from your note, I gather, that you was all wet as a salesman.

"So I s'pose she figgered it was up to her to pervide for you. That's the way she is, always looking out for them that can't take care of theirselves."

Norman couldn't trust himself to reply. So that was the way Molly Todd regarded him, was it? An object of charity! He seethed with wounded pride.

It is all very well for a young man to describe himself to a girl as a washout, but to have her really think him so is something else yet.

Bitter, savage disclaimers rose to his lips, but he choked the words back. Why waste his indignation on a mere subordinate? He would wait until he faced Molly Todd herself, and then let her know that she could not play her Lady Bountiful tricks on him.

He would tell her that he considered her offer as nothing short of an insult, and her method of bringing him there as a high-handed outrage for which he intended to exact heavy reparation.

So, nursing his grievance, and employing himself in framing new and more blistering phrases with which to crush her, he finished the rest of the ride in silence, deaf to the further conversation of his companion.

And so eager was he to have his say that when the hack arrived before the castle he sprang out almost before it stopped and went charging up the steps.

The butler opened the door for him with a very different manner from that

he had shown in the previous occasion, but Norman passed him without a word and, tight-lipped, with a dead-white face and blazing eyes, stalked on into the hall in search of Molly.

Then he saw her coming down the stairs toward him. And somehow his head started to go round in silly fashion, and the lights began to multiply before his eyes.

The day of wearing excitement, without food, and topped off by that fierce, emotional upheaval on his way out there, had evidently been too much for him.

Desperately he fought against the feeling of growing faintness. "Good Lord," he thought. "I can't do another flop in front of her!"

Clenching his hands until the nails bit into his palms, he struggled to hold himself upright, so that he could deliver the rebuke he was planning for her.

But in his effort at control, he turned his head a little to one side. As he did so, he galvanized suddenly into shocked horror and dismay.

For there, peering out between the curtains of a doorway at the foot of the staircase, he saw a dark, saturnine face twisted into a scowl of murderous hate, and a hand aiming a revolver straight at Molly's heart.

With a startled cry of warning, Norman flung himself toward the lurking assassin. But before he could reach the doorway a wave of blackness encompassed him. He was conscious of seeing the fellow's eyes veer to him for an instant and of hearing a faint, metallic click; then he knew no more. He had toppled to the floor in a dead faint.

When he came back to himself, there was the pungent odor of smelling salts in his nostrils, and he was vaguely aware of voices speaking above him.

"Reckon, he was just played out, ma'am," boomed one which he recognized as Big Bill's deep bass. "Kicking on things in general, while we was riding out here, I heard him say he hadn't had nothing to eat all day.

"Oh, the poor boy!" It was Molly's voice now, and she spoke with quick solicitude. Turning to some one else, probably the butler, she gave hasty directions that food be brought.

The daze which had enveloped Norman's mind was passing now, and to his clearing senses flashed a vivid recollection of that sinister figure he had seen in the doorway.

Waving away the smelling salts, and blinking his eyes open, he struggled up from the couch on which they had laid him.

"Did you get the murderer?" he demanded excitedly.

He saw Molly and Big Bill exchange questioning glances, and the ranch manager tapped his forehead significantly.

"No! No!" protested Norman vehemently. "There was a man there, I tell you—behind the curtains of the doorway yonder.

He had a gun, and he fired at Miss Todd. He can't have got far away. You can catch him, if you hurry."

But still he could see from their skeptical faces that they believed him the victim of a delusion.

"What did the man look like?" questioned Molly as if to humor him.

"A young man. With a dark, thin face. Might be a Spaniard. Had a little, black mustache."

Again Molly and Big Bill exchanged quick glances. But this time there was a different expression in them.

"Da Silva!" Both of them spoke the name together.

With a rapid movement, Big Bill stepped over to the doorway, and stooping to the floor, came back with a pistol in his hand.

"By heck, the boy was right!" he exclaimed. "Here's a gun, ma'am, and fitted with a silencer, too. The rat must have sneaked back after he left, and have posted himself there to get you.

"Never mind, though." He whirled with a grim set to his jaw. "We'll land that bozo if we have to comb every inch of Los Chicos County to do it. He ain't got more 'n fifteen minutes start on us."

He hurried out as he spoke, and a moment later Norman heard from the direction of the barns, the furious clanging of an alarm bell, rousing all the men on the estate to take part in the chase.

Meanwhile, Jarley, the butler, his poise unruffled by the excitement, came in bearing a tray loaded down with food. Molly insisted that Norman must let her serve him.

Then, as she fed him spoonfuls of hot, nourishing broth, she explained the reason for the attempt upon her life.

"The man you saw," she told him, "was Ponce Da Silva, my secretary. I have always trusted him fully. But I have known for some time there was a leak in my affairs, and I realize now that he must have sold out to the other crowd.

"Still I would probably have gone on in ignorance," she continued, "if it had not been for the note you sent me to-night. When I received it, I could not understand how I had missed seeing you. For no intimation had come to me that you were calling.

"Then I began to investigate, and learned that Jarley had received his orders to tell you I was engaged from Da Silva. The fellow probably thought he was perfectly safe in doing this, as you would be going away from town, and he was in a position to intercept any messages that you might send.

"I called Da Silva in, and taxed him with his treachery. He tried to make some flimsy excuses; but my eyes were open to him now, and I told him he must go. He left, but, as Big Bill says, he must have sneaked back, and tried to kill me out of revenge.

"And he is an expert pistol shot," she concluded. "I think I have you to thank, not only for unmasking the scoundrel, but also for saving my life. Your movement toward him, and the cry you gave, probably threw him off his aim, for the bullet is embedded in the wall about two inches above where my head would have been as I reached the foot of the stairs."

But Norman, who had been examining the pistol as she talked, was not entirely satisfied with her explanation of the crime. On the butt of the weapon he had found the freshly scratched initials, N. R., and the circumstance suggested another solution to him.

"What I think, Miss Todd," he said slowly, "is that Da Silva was acting under orders."

And he told her of Fenton's ominous warning, that unless he kept hands off the irrigation business, he was apt to find the climate of Los Chicos County unhealthy for both himself and Molly Todd.

"Don't you see," he argued. "They know that we're getting warm to the crooked business, and they're worried. What they were trying to do to-night was to rid themselves of both of us at one stroke. You were to be killed, and with the initials on the gun pointing to me as the murderer, the chances were that your people here would lynch me."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WITHDRAWN OFFER.

MOLLY, inclined at first to question the theory advanced by Norman, gradually came to admit, as they discussed the evidence, that it might very possibly be true.

To convince her, Norman, in his methodical fashion, got out his little notebook and began setting down in chronological order the facts of which they had cognizance.

When he had finished, the record stood something like this:

Between five and six that afternoon he had apprised Fenton that he was aware of the changes in the dam and suspicious of their purpose. The commissioner in return had warned him that he'd better drop such investigations and keep clear of local troublemakers, or he'd find the climate of Los Chicos County unhealthy for him—as unhealthy as it was going to be for Molly Todd.

At six ten he had started for Molly's house to lay the information in his possession before her.

At six fifteen, according to Jarley, the butler, there was a telephone call at the castle for Da Silva, Molly's secretary.

This call, on being traced up, was reported by the local exchange to have come from the commissioner's office in the courthouse. The inference was, of course, that somebody there was apprising Da Silva of Norman's imminent arrival and his purpose.

At six forty-five, approximately, Norman reached the castle, and his presence was reported by Jarley to Da Silva, who, without consulting Molly, directed that the visitor be notified she was engaged.

At about seven o'clock, or a little later, Norman, who was being held up within the grounds by a blowout, had given his message for Molly to the employee at the lodgekeeper's house, and this had been delivered to her at eight, just about the time that Norman arrived back at Rio Rita.

On receiving the message, Molly had at once confronted Da Silva with it, and failing to receive any satisfactory explanation of his action, had summarily dismissed him. Then, as he left the house, she had sent Big Bill riding off post haste to the village to intercept Norman and bring him back to her.

The rest was largely a matter of conjecture. Da Silva did not lodge in the castle, but lived alone in one of the small cottages on the estate. So it was impossible to tell what his exact movements had been.

It seemed fair to assume, however, that he had learned of what took place in the village, and knew that Norman was returning with Big Bill. Chances were that the fact had been communicated to him in some fashion by the gang, although he may have only reasoned it out from seeing Big Bill's horse, Jasper, come back without his master.

At any rate, either under orders or on his own initiative, he had endeavored to turn the circumstance to a sinister advantage.

From his acquaintance with the house, he knew just about what would happen on Norman's arrival. Big Bill, after landing his man at the door, would go back to the stables to look after his horse. Jarley, having admitted the visitor, would retire to his pantry.

There would be an interval, when with Molly coming downstairs to greet Norman, the two would be alone in the hall together; and that, Da Silva figured, would be his opportunity.

With Molly shot through the heart and falling to the floor, it was natural to suppose that Norman would at once rush to her, and be discovered bending over her body. Then the pistol would be found on the floor, marked with his initials, and he would be accused of the murder.

In the excitement no one would stop to question the flimsy nature of the evidence against him, or to listen to his protestations of innocence. In their rage and fury the employees of the estate, all of whom were devoted to Molly, would simply take him out and string him up.

And if they showed any qualms or hesitation on this score, Da Silva would be ready with fervid appeals to incite the mob spirit.

Thus he reasoned, no doubt, the two chief obstacles to the plans of the courthouse crowd would be eliminated, and

they would be free to pursue their operations unhampered.

Big Bill, who came in just about the time that the summary was completed, nodded his agreement to it as he read it over, and for the first time gave Norman a glance of admiration.

"Some headpiece on you, boy," he granted with a touch of surprise. "Reg'lar Shylock Holmes, ain't you, or whatever it is?

"You've got it doped out just about the way the dern greaser figgered. Chances is, 'twould have worked like that too, if you had not started for him and gave that squawk 't deflected his aim.

"Fixin' to have you lynched, was he?" he added grimly. "Well, mebbe we'll find a better use for the rope when we git our hands on him."

"No trace of him yet, then?" questioned Norman.

Big Bill gave a shake of the head.

"Nothin'," he said, "'cept that the Chink cook seen him hooking it out the back of the house, and things at his cottage was tossed topsy-turvy, like he had done a quick get-away.

"Probably he believed, when he saw you faint, that he'd croaked you with his wild shot; and calc'latin' that suspicion was apt to settle on him, he did not waste no time in skipping.

"But there ain't no risk of him getting off," he asserted. "He couldn't have made clear of the grounds yet, and I've got every pass out guarded. He's hiding in the shrubbery somewheres, or else parked up a tree, and we'll round him up soon's daylight comes, if not before.

"What I came back for"—he hesitated slightly—"was to fix it so he can't sneak into the house. Now, don't you get nervous, Miss Molly," as she gave an apprehensive start. "I had to tell you, because I knew you'd see the boys patrolling outside and would be wondering what they was there for. But you can rest easy, all right. I'll guarantee you that not even a mouse could slip through the line we've set. 'Sides, it's ten to one we'll have the varmint before you're ready to turn in."

With that assurance, he hurried off to resume direction of the search, leaving Molly and Norman once more alone.

They were in the library—a large room with leather-covered furniture, book-lined walls, and an open fire burning on the hearth—whither she had conducted him after he had recovered from the effects of his swoon. Norman, fed and established in his big easy chair before the cheery blaze, was serenely at peace.

But Molly, in contrast to her usual breezy poise, was plainly troubled. As the ranch manager left them, she stepped hurriedly to the window and, drawing aside its heavy curtain, glanced out.

But the sight of a shadow, sentinel-like figure pacing back and forth across the garden path below did not seem to reassure her.

With a little shiver she let the curtain fall into place and turned back into the room.

Pausing beside the table, she glanced down at the notebook with its penciled summary, which Big Bill had left lying there when he had finished reading it. A frown creased her forehead.

"Mr. Rich, these people are evidently more dangerous than I had imagined," she said in a worried voice. "The fact that they could corrupt Da Silva frightens me. It shows how cunning and powerful they must be; for I would have said it was all to Da Silva's advantage to go straight with me. Now I scarcely know whom to trust.

"And here"—she tapped the notebook with her forefinger—"is proof that they do not even stop at murder.

"But perhaps," she broke off in compunction, "I shouldn't go into this now. You have had a grueling

day, even without the upsetting experience here. You must be shaken and worn out.

"Of course you are. Forgive my thoughtlessness. I'll ring for Jarley right away, and have you shown to your room. Let what I was about to say wait until morning."

"No, please!" Norman raised his voice in protest, as her finger reached for the bell. "I don't want to go to bed. I'm quite comfortable here. And I'm not nearly so all-in as you think.

"I guess Big Bill was about right when he said all the matter with me was that I hadn't had anything to eat. Now since that's remedied," he smiled, "Richard is very much himself again. So if you don't mind, I wish you would go ahead and talk to me just as you intended."

"Well, it was this," she hesitated. "When I learned of Da Silva's treachery to-night and dismissed him, I thought of you at once. The note you sent me, you remember, was in part a statement of the situation here which you had prepared as a telegram to your firm.

"I gathered from some lines you had crossed out, that you had either lost, or were in danger of losing, your position with them. So I sent Big Bill racing to town after you, with instructions to bring you back here at any hazard."

"He did it," interjected Norman under his breath.

"My idea," she continued, without noticing the interruption, "was that you might be willing to accept the place left vacant by Da Silva. Or, rather, not exactly that," she amended. I do not really require a secretary now.

"What I need is more an adviser—some one who is capable of watching out for my interests in connection with this irrigation project and in whom I can trust."

"Yes?" said Norman.

Put in that way by her, the proposal sounded a very different thing from that which was bluntly voiced by Big Bill, and had so deeply wounded his pride. This seemed rather tempting, in fact.

"But in view of this affair to-night"—she placed her finger on the notebook again—"and all that is implied by it, I have changed my mind. I shall not offer you the position."

"Eh?" Norman sat up as if somebody had doused him with a bucket of cold water.

"No," said Molly firmly, "I can not ask you to take such a risk. After all, this is not a fight of yours. Los Chicos County means just one contract to you.

"Why should you run the chance of assassination for that? Let us who live here and are vitally interested take the hazards."

In the face of this unselfish avowal Norman flushed under the reflection that his own thoughts had been largely tinged by self-interest. Then he braced up and, grasping the arms of his chair, turned toward her.

"Miss Todd," he said earnestly, "before you withdraw that offer, I'd like to tell you just where I stand. Sit down, won't you, please, because I want to lay all my cards on the table, and it will take some little time."

He started in then to describe to her his position and prospects with Blair & Co., the crushing blow his unaccountable discharge had been to him, and his long and fruitless search for another berth, until as a last resort he had gone as a salesman with the firm in St. Louis.

"You say that this Los Chicos job was just one contract to me," he broke out a trifle bitterly. "Well, let me tell you, it meant about everything in the world, so far as I am concerned. Honestly, now that I have lost it and been let out by the firm, I don't know where to turn.

"Crawford told me of a possible vacancy in Philadelphia, and I was going on to see about it. But it

might not have materialized. Maybe he was only kidding. Anyhow, a man with two discharges to his credit does not find it so easy to make a new connection.

"In short," he gave a rueful smile, "I am about in the same fix as a shipwrecked sailor in a waterlogged boat, with not a sail in sight.

"But I want you to believe"—he pounded his fist down fiercely on the padded arm of his chair—"that no matter if I had all the prospects in the world and a dozen different firms bidding for my services, and no matter if the risks here were a hundred times more dangerous than they are, I would still choose to stay in Los Chicos County and help you down this crew of crooks and grafters.

"That's my case, Miss Todd," he concluded, rising to his feet and standing before her. "I need you, and you need me. You can't fight this gang alone, and I can be of more use to you than anybody else you could probably get.

"So I'm not going to let you withdraw that offer, and I hereby accept it. As you told me to-day, we are going to see this thing through, shoulder to shoulder."

"Well," she laughed a little unsteadily, "you don't leave me much choice, do you? I am beginning to believe you are a very dictatorial sort of person, Mr. Norman Rich. So, just to assert my own authority, I am going to order you off now to bed."

Before he went, though, she shook hands with him on the bargain they had made. And in spite of the day of successive defeats, Norman went to his room with the light step of a conqueror.

The glance of admiration she had given him made him feel like a hero.

Yet, as he lay awake, the muffled footfall of the guard pacing beneath his window reminded him that he was in danger, and the recollection of Da Silva's murderous face as he had seen it peering out through the curtains gave him an involuntary qualm.

What had he let himself in for?

CHAPTER IX.

MOLLY IN A CORNER.

MORNING, however, relieved Norman of most of his misgivings—things look differently in the clear light of day—and he descended to breakfast in quite chipper spirits.

He had thought he was arising early, and was therefore a little surprised to find Molly at the table before him. She in turn was disposed to scold him for getting up.

"You should have remained in bed and rested this morning," she said.

"Bunk!" he laughed. "One sniff of this mountain air is all the recuperation I need. Besides, you forget I'm a working man now. I've got to be on the job."

Naturally he wanted to know if Da Silva had been caught yet, but she shook her head in answer to the question.

"They have scoured every foot of the estate since daylight," she said, "and failed to get a trace of him. Big Bill is unable to understand it. But it must have been that he either got off through one of the passes before the guard was set, or else managed to wriggle past them in the darkness.

"I don't think we will see anything more of him," she argued reassuringly. "Even if he were apt to stay in this part of the country himself, and run the risk of capture, the gang would see to it that he cleared out.

"He could be of no further value to them now that he has been exposed, and they know that he is a weak-spined creature who would sell them out as readily as he did me. He's the sort that would commit a cowardly assassination, but if behind the bars, would round on them in a minute to save his own skin.

"Yes," she insisted; "unless I badly miss my guess, Da Silva is already across the border, over into Mexico, or else speeding there as fast as he can make it."

"But he's easily described," suggested Norman. "He could be overhauled by telegraph or telephone."

"No!" She spoke a trifle sharply. "I don't want him overhauled. I told Big Bill to call off the pursuit, and also to throttle down any talk about the affair as much as possible.

"It's always a good plan, I think, to keep your enemy guessing. The more time the crowd puts in at speculating on what I'm up to, the less they'll have to be planning mischief."

"We-ll, perhaps," admitted Norman. "But I think if it was me, Miss Todd, I'd want a dangerous reptile like Da Silva where I was sure he couldn't do any more harm."

But she merely replied curtly that she had given the matter full thought, and was confident she was doing the wisest thing.

Evidently Norman's new employer had no fondness for having her decisions questioned. She was one of these who could either take advice or leave it alone.

They had finished breakfast by this time, and Molly led the way to her office, a business-like room which, with its filing cases, big flat-topped desk and labor-saving equipment, resembled the quarters of a corporation executive.

And Molly, seeming to take color from her surroundings like a chameleon, was as direct and businesslike in her manner as the environment.

In a few brief, clear sentences, she made Norman acquainted with the arrangement of the office, outlined the scope of his duties, and settled terms and salary. She was as straightforward and unfeminine in all this as the squarest-jawed machinery man he had ever encountered.

"As I told you, Mr. Rich," she said, "I don't really require a secretary. I have the affairs of the estate so systematized now that I can handle by myself all the work that Da Silva has been doing.

"Your duties will be wholly connected with the irrigation project. Yet, for the same reason I called off the pursuit of Da Silva, I prefer to have it assumed that you are merely taking his place."

"More play acting?" commented Norman a bit wryly.

"Call it that, if you wish. You will probably not fool the gang to any extent. But it may make them a little less wary.

"You see, I want you to watch the progress of operations for me, but to do so not as if it were a matter of business with you, but more in the manner of your inspection at the dam yesterday, as if you were actuated by mere idle curiosity."

"But what operations will there be to watch?" objected Norman. "Work on the pumping plant won't be commenced for several weeks, I imagine, and that on the dam will be stopped at once, of course, as soon as you take action."

"As soon as I take action?" repeated Molly, lifting her brows. "What sort of action?"

"Why, an injunction suit, or something of the kind. You can easily show that with these changes in it, the dam will never be of any value to Los Chicos County. The only land it can irrigate is those few acres of plateau along the cañon over on the Bridger side."

"But I am not going to file any injunction suit," said Molly quietly. "I have been thinking over the situation pretty carefully since I talked to you last night, Mr. Rich, and I have decided to let them go ahead and finish the dam as they have started. So you see, there will be plenty of operations for you to keep an eye on."

He stared at her incredulously.

"You mean," he gasped, "that you

are going to let them go ahead with a piece of construction that is doomed in advance to be a failure?

"Or, maybe," he questioned stiffly, as the suggestion struck him, "you don't take any stock in my story of these changes they are making?"

"Don't be silly!" She gave a gesture of impatience. "I believe you absolutely. Otherwise, I wouldn't be asking you to continue your investigations."

She fell into silence for a minute or two, tapping reflectively with her finger tips on the top of the desk.

"Mr. Rich," she said at length, "I am playing for a pretty big stake in this game. You may not know it, but I have taken up the entire bond issue on this irrigation project. If the system proves a failure, I am practically wiped out, a bankrupt."

"Then just for that reason," he broke in warmly, "you ought to take immediate steps to stop these ruinous changes."

"No." She shook her head. "That would only mean having them strike at me from a new and perhaps more insidious angle. I've tried that method with them, and always they came back at me with a more cunning form of attack.

"So I've decided to try a new line of strategy.

"You see—?" She paused again to tap with her fingers on the desk, as if hesitating whether or not to take him fully into her confidence.

"Well, it's this way," she went on. "What you've told me about these alterations in the plans of the dam has confirmed a suspicion that's been in the back of my head for some time. There's some more powerful and far shrewder interest behind these various moves against me than is apparent on the surface.

"Who, would you say," she questioned, turning to him abruptly, "is it that's planning and directing all this funny business?"

"Why, Fenton, I suppose." Norman ventured a bit uncertainly. "He seems to be the head one among the commissioners. Or, maybe, Dick Crawford is advising them what to do."

But she dismissed the suggestion with a flick of the fingers.

"That conceited salesman!" she sneered. "He isn't enough of a heavyweight. And the commissioners are absolutely out of consideration; they're saps. Why, they haven't the brains among them to see this thing, or the guts to put it through.

"The most those cheap crooks could figure on is a few thousands of petty graft.

"And they'd never dare, of themselves, to turn against their own people, and alter the dam for the benefit of Bridger County.

"No," she declared emphatically. "This is a play for millions. The idea is to make the irrigation project a failure by putting in an inadequate pumping plant, and building a dam that furnishes water only to the other side of the cañon.

"Then the bonds I hold will become worthless, and the property against which they are issued—every acre of the Todd estate—will be thrown on the market and sold for a song."

"And then," Norman broke in, catching her drift, "all that the purchaser will have to do is reënforce the dam to its original specifications, and increase the capacity of the pumping plant; and those barren acres he has bought will become immensely valuable. I see."

"Exactly," nodded Molly. "That's undoubtedly the scheme. And it's equally certain that some rich and powerful influence is engineering it, not any such small-time fry as Crawford or the county commissioners. They're simply pawns, obeying orders, and promised enough from the plunder to make it worth while to skip the country when the crash comes."

"That's been my mistake." Her face clouded over. "I've underestimated the forces against me. Thinking I had only to match wits against a trio of dunderheads, I've let myself be maneuvered into a corner and have surrendered all my defenses.

"And now I suddenly find myself facing a financial Goliath—some one so big and crafty, that if it had not been for your revelations in regard to the dam, I would never have dreamed of his existence, or what he was up to.

"Why, Mr. Rich," she said impressively, "when I read your note last night, and at last got a glimpse of the true situation, it was like a clap of thunder to me."

Norman looked troubled.

"And you really mean," he questioned, "that if this dirty scheme goes through, you will be ruined?"

"Beggared." She spread out her hands. "Carried away by my enthusiasm, I put every cent I own into these irrigation bonds."

"But can't you get from under now, before the facts become known?" he suggested. "Sell these bonds even at a sacrifice?"

"Hopeless." She shrugged. "No possible market for them. They are not regular county bonds, you must understand, but so-called assessment bonds issued only against the property to be benefited. Unless the irrigation system works out successfully, they are mere waste paper. If I had not taken them up, nobody else would have touched them with a pair of ten-foot tongs."

Norman's jaw sagged an inch lower.

"There doesn't seem anything to do," he muttered gloomily.

"Nothing, but to fight," she retorted, squaring back her shoulders.

"Fight? Yes, but whom? You can't do much fighting against a nameless shadow."

"No, and that's why I'm asking you to do this 'play acting,' I spoke about. We've got to emulate the mole, and burrow under ground for a time until we can hear the tread of Goliath gumshoeing overhead.

"Meanwhile, I don't want the county commissioners or Crawford to get a suspicion that we have any idea of other opposition than themselves. It may not be very flattering to you, but I want them to keep on thinking that you are a mere blundering boob, who failing as a salesman has taken the job of writing my letters, and that I am not much better.

"It's unfortunate, of course," she said, "that you mentioned your discoveries at the dam to Fenton. But I imagine I can straighten that out all right.

"I'll have an angry set-to with him over it, making all sorts of wild accusations, and then let him persuade me that you don't know what you are talking about, and that the dam, even though changed, will answer all requirements.

"But don't do any more broadcasting on the subject, please, Mr. Rich," she warned soberly. "What you have already learned about the dam, as well as anything you may find out in the future must be discussed only with me.

"I lay especial stress upon this," she explained, "because even a whisper of the facts might bring disastrous consequences. You saw how high public feeling ran there at the courthouse yesterday.

"Well, if my following learned of this, no telling what would happen. They might wreck the dam. There might be a lot of bloodshed."

Norman promised humbly that he would do no more talking; and she relaxed from the serious mood into which she had fallen.

"You ride, don't you, Mr. Rich?"

There was a teasing twinkle in her eye. Norman, remembering the undignified tumble he had taken off that bucking pony in front of her the day before, went red as a boiled lobster.

"I do not," he protested.

"But you can drive a flivver, I suppose?"

"Ah, that is something else yet. 'Bawn an' bred in dat brier patch,' Miss Todd. I come from Detroit."

"Well, then, if you don't mind, I'm going to ask you to put in the rest of the day by driving over to Salem, the county seat of Bridger County. It has struck me that we might as well begin our investigations by finding out just who owns that plateau land on the other side of the cañon."

Accordingly, Norman started off in one of the cars belonging to the estate. He had driven only a few feet, however, when a hail from the house stopped him. Big Bill approached, carrying a pistol and belt in his hands.

"Miss Molly says you are to wear this," he announced.

Norman shook his head.

"Nothing doing," he said. "I never owned one in my life before, and I wouldn't know how to use it if I did have it."

"If Miss Molly says you are to wear it, you'll wear it."

The ranch manager's voice carried a warning note, and Norman recognized the gleam in his eye. The memory of his abduction was too fresh for him not to realize that "Miss Molly's orders" were law.

With a sigh of resignation he buckled on the belt and started off, reaching Rio Rita without incident. But while he stopped for gas at Commissioner Creel's filling station across from the hotel, Crawford sighted him and came hurrying over.

"Well, if it isn't the long lost Charlie Ross!" he exclaimed mockingly. "The dames sure are getting desperate nowadays, when they have to send out gunmen to abduct their boy friends."

Norman bristled at the sneering insult in his tone.

"That 'll do, Crawford," he warned darkly. "I've told you before that you'd better keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Oh, sure. I was only joking, of course. But speaking seriously, have you come to your senses yet, and decided to go after that Philadelphia job?"

"No," said Norman curtly. "I am going to stay right here."

Crawford stared at him.

"You're crazy. What can you do in Rio Rita?"

"I've got a good job already, keeping accounts and looking after the correspondence of the Todd estate." Norman's impersonation of artless pride was really not half bad. "Miss Todd has taken me on as her private secretary."

Crawford shot him a quick glance of displeasure.

"Her snooper, you mean, don't you?" he snapped. "Better go slow on that stuff. Fenton told me—"

He broke off as if fearful of saying too much, and instead took up a persuasive tone.

"Oh, heck, Rich!" He laid his hand on Norman's arm. "You're too good a man to bury yourself in a dump like this, working for a woman. No future in that.

"Listen, boy," he urged. "You go after that Philadelphia vacancy. Let me wire to Joe Devlin that you're on your way, and that as a personal favor to me, I want him to place you. That 'll practically cinch it."

"Thanks." Norman shook his head indifferently. "But I'm quite satisfied where I am. Nice day, isn't it? Well, I've got to be moving along." And off he chugged down the street.

Crawford stood looking after him with a scowl.

"I can't make that guy at all," he grumbled to Commissioner Creel, who had come out from the garage to join him. "He seems an absolute dub, and yet he's always surprising you. I guess it's just as I told him, he's a fool for luck. He—

"Hello!" He broke off with a start. "He's turned off to the right there, at the end of the street. That's the road over to Bridger County, isn't it? What's he going there for?"

The garage man's close-set eyes narrowed.

"Reckon I'd better trail him and find out," he muttered, hurrying over to a faster car than Norman's that was standing at the side of the street.

But as he eased himself into the seat, he paused as if struck by a suggestion, and beckoned Crawford to him.

"Say," he dropped his voice to a whisper; "that's a awful lonely road 'twixt here an' Salem. How'd it be if Rich never come back. You know who's hiding out over there in the mountains."

"You mean"—Crawford's face blanched slightly—"Da Silva?"

"Sure." The commissioner unconcernedly bit off a chew of tobacco. "I've got to see him anyhow to slip him the dough for his get-away. I'll arrange to have him finish the job—if you say so."

Crawford hesitated; then gave a nod of the head, and turned away. And Creel, sliding his gears into mesh, set off in Norman's wake.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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THE AUTHOR OF "ROPE NECKTIES" HAS A NARROW ESCAPE

Statements have been made by numerous readers of Western stories that the authors only knew the plains from picture post cards, and gained their knowledge of old days on the frontier from a framed painting of "Custer's Last Stand." Without putting myself in a defensive position I think it may be interesting to readers to know that I was through Texas, Arizona, and Wyoming some eighteen years ago, as well as the Northwest, and talked to lots of old-timers about days that are past.

Once in Bisbee, Arizona, I met up with the sheriff of the county and came near being detained ten days as a material witness because of a man they were holding as an accessory to a killing. It seemed I had sauntered into a saloon, and the barkeep of same tells me of a killing in the hills; the killers had come into his place, left a blood-stained coat and took another hanging on the hook, then got them a couple of fast horses and streaked it for Mexico.

"Did you tell the sheriff?" I inquired.

"No, no," he drawled. "That's his business."

It so happened later that, on the train, I sat beside a fine looking Westerner. In conversation I related this incident.

"You're the man we want as witness," he broke out. "I'm the sheriff of Cochise County. We've arrested this barkeep for holding his tongue—but your story will help."

Finally, at my pleading, he took my written deposition.

This sheriff had his Colt swinging from his hip on a double belt. A notch ran through it, and a little hook had been soldered to the weapon. He could pull it in an instant. In an answer to questions about the old cattlemen feuds with rustlers, and how they came out, he said:

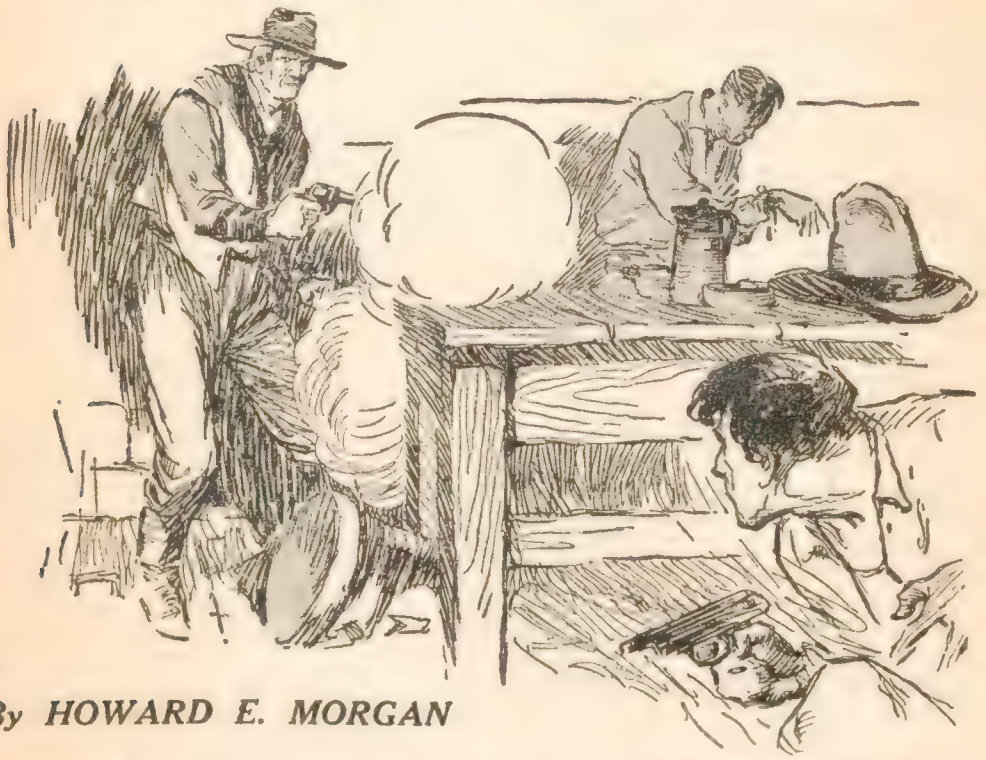
"Well, sir, the end was they generally exterminated one another."

For years I carried a derringer, with two chambers, I picked up in Sheridan, Wyoming. They were favorites with gamblers in the old days. These weapons, lying in a vest pocket, or ready to drop down from the sleeve into a ready hand, were deadly.

Formerly, in the West, it was true, a man often had to take the law into his own hands. Old-timers will testify to this. In towns like Dodge City, at its wildest, peace officers like Bat Masterson, whom I once knew, kept a semblance of order, but this did not apply to the open ranges. And in Tombstone, Arizona, during the reign of the Earp brothers, it all depended which side you were on. Boot Hill often received new additions without much questioning.

JOHN WILSTACH.

Gunplay on Moonlow



By HOWARD E. MORGAN

The man who, in a good cause, shot wild, then realized he was mixing in a quarrel of which he really knew nothing

"SAM DODD, he in trouble. Dam bad trouble, for sure."

The words were mumbled out of the old Indian's toothless mouth in a manner as matter of fact as though he had been asking for another portion of bacon rind. Like most Indians—particularly of the old order—Joe Muskrat never became noticeably excited about anything.

Evidently this bit of news didn't mean much to him; he had been hanging around Dad Williams's little cabin for the better part of two days, toasting his ancient bones in the hot sun, without uttering half a dozen words. Dad Williams drew his lanky body erect and faced the Indian; the old prospector was, evidently, much excited.

"Sam — Sam Dodd — in trouble? What kind of trouble, Joe? Where—"

Dad stopped, abruptly. There was no use questioning Joe Muskrat. The leather-skinned old Piute would sit there like a wooden image, and stare, uncomprehendingly. Never could get nothing out of *him;* marvel was that he had spoken at all.

Probably once a month, Joe Muskrat made a sociable call at Dad Williams's isolated cabin in the foothills of the Moonlow Mountains; sometimes he stayed only an hour or two, sometimes two or three days; but seldom it was that he spoke except to grunt a

greeting; departing, he slipped silently away in the woods, usually taking some choice tidbit from his host's stores secreted beneath his tattered coat.

Dad Williams found his pipe, lit it, and puffed furiously. Sam Dodd—in trouble! It hardly seemed possible that Sam Dodd could be in trouble of any kind.

No more mild-mannered, inoffensive individual ever lived than Sam Dodd; always reminded him of a gray mouse, Sam did. Still, living much alone, as Sam Dodd did up there on that bleak mountain, was apt to do queer things to a man.

Perhaps old Sam had gone crazy? But no, that didn't make sense, either. Dodd wasn't the kind to lose his head over ordinary things: in his lifetime there had been serious troubles galore, and, if Sam Dodd had been prone to madness, he would have lost his senses long since.

But he *was* in trouble—Joe Muskrat did not lie—and, perhaps, he needed help. Dad Williams puffed thoughtfully on his glowing pipe. If old Sam needed help, he, Dad Williams, would offer that help—that was all there was to it.

Sam Dodd was not a particular friend of his, but Dad Williams owed Sam a debt—a debt quarter of a century old.

Upward of twenty years ago, Sam Dodd had grubstaked Dad Williams when the latter was down and out, just how far down and how nearly out, none knew but Dad Williams. Dad had paid back that grubstake, of course, but a debt—like that—can't be paid in money, or, so Dad Williams thought.

At that time Dodd had been a poor man; he still was a poor man. In twenty years Dad Williams had come up in his world. He had worked hard, saved his money, and was well thought of in Alton County—by the adherents of one political party at least.

For ten years he had served as sheriff. Three years since he had retired from active participation in the affairs of Altonville, the county seat, and had reverted to the old life. He had built a little cabin, fifteen miles from town, in the hills, and daily prospected for gold, as he had done in the old days.

But he was beginning to find that he had lived too long engaged in the busy doings of men; already he had arranged to run for sheriff in the fall against Gus Calderwood, the present incumbent.

Having gradually worked himself up to the point where he craved action, Sam Dodd's predicament—whatever it might be—came as a doubly welcome salve to his energetic nature. He would help Sam Dodd, of course. Anything. Poor old Sam!

At first Dad had figured on going to town and finding out what Dodd's difficulty was, but the more he thought about it, the more firmly convinced he became that the old man's trouble had to do with money. This being the case, it would be best to deal with Sam Dodd direct—sort of on the quiet.

Prideful, Sam was, and it might be difficult to persuade him to accept a loan.

Mid afternoon found Dad Williams well on his way into the hills, bound for Sam Dodd's cabin. In his belt there was close to five thousand dollars in gold. He carried a shiny new Winchester rifle across an arm, and a pearl-handled six-gun in a holster.

There was another gun stuck in his belt beneath the corduroy vest, but this latter was not for advertising purposes. Felt hat pulled down over an eye at a rakish angle, short pipe jutting upward out of a corner of his mouth, the old man strode swiftly and purposefully onward and upward through a sparse jackpine thicket toward the serrated ridges of old Moonlow's upper slopes.

To a casual observer, Dad Williams presented a picture typical of those

ageless men, who roam, quiet and unassuming, but amazingly capable, through so many vital pages of the history of the West. To those who knew him well, Dad Williams was a definite entity, a force to be reckoned with seriously under any and all conditions.

It is safe to assume, however, that if Dad could have foreseen the difficulties which were to ensue from this altruistic pilgrimage into the hills, there would have been less healthy confidence in his sturdy old heart, as he trudged purposefully on through the sweet-scented thickets toward Sam Dodd's tumble-down cabin.

Along about noon, Dad topped a knob-like hill, which served as an excellent vantage point from which to view the semiopen country for miles around. While his eyes were becoming accustomed to the shimmering sun on the sandstone ledges across the valley, the sound of a rifle shot drew his casual attention to the opposite direction.

He was not particularly interested at first—probably some wandering individual like himself taking a pot shot at a rabbit—and then the scene came clear, abruptly. Men — a man hunt: there were three of them, following one man.

The fleeing man scuttled like a scared rabbit up the side of a brush grown slope. His pursuers followed, not so swiftly, hampered no doubt by unfamiliarity with the country.

From time to time one of the three men fired his rifle, but the range was long and the target an elusive thing at best. All four men were afoot.

Dad failed to recognize any one of the four at first, then, the fugitive dodged out from behind a huge bowlder and stood in plain sight, breathing hard— Sam Dodd! The fugitive was Sam Dodd!

Characteristically, Dad Williams did not pause to ponder upon the whys and wherefores of the matter: Sam Dodd certainly was in trouble, as Joe had said, and he, Dad Williams, would give Sam a hand.

Swiftly he mapped out a course of procedure. He would intercept Sam, down there on that wooded ridge, and hold the three men off until Sam got away.

Swinging the rifle about ready for instant use, he started away, running swiftly and surely down the rocky slope toward the spot where he figured Sam Dodd would come out. He was hidden from all four of the men, temporarily, by a razor-backed ridge of glistening sandstone.

Reaching the lower level, which was a continuation of the flat-topped ridge on which Sam Dodd had stood, Dad stepped behind a jagged bowlder and waited.

He had not long to wait. His labored approach, presaged by a clattering of loose gravel, Sam Dodd staggered wearily out into the open.

The little man was in the last stages of exhaustion. His face was gray. The breath hissed in short, staccato gasps through his white lips.

He was unarmed; his clothes were dirty and torn, his hands and face blood smeared.

"Sam!"

Dad Williams fronted the weary fugitive. Dodd stopped; his little bloodshot eyes glared wildly; his gnarled hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically, as though he was about to throw himself upon the lean, dark-skinned man who faced him.

"I'll hold 'em off, Sam. You make fer Mad Muller's cabin. I'll meet you there."

Doubt replaced the desperation on Sam Dodd's thin face. He hesitated a moment.

"No time now t' talk. Git goin'. Here they come—"

Dad Williams threw his rifle to his shoulder, and fired, once, twice, thrice, in the general direction of a vague shape, that was creeping up the slope,

dodging from bowlder to bowlder. Sam Dodd slipped wearily away.

Dad devoted his efforts to the strategic covering of Dodd's retreat. He wouldn't shoot—to kill—of course, unless it became absolutely necessary. Chances were, a few carefully placed shots would discourage old Sam's pursuers; if they had any sense at all, they would soon discover that he had them bottled up.

They couldn't reach the ridge top without exposing themselves, and, by the time they had circled about to come in from the rear, old Sam would be safe in Mad Muller's long deserted, cavelike retreat. Little chance that any one of those three men down there had ever heard of Mad Muller's place.

The location of that stone shack, built in a crevice in the rocky walls years since by the madman, Carl Muller, was known to but few men; probably not more than four or five of the oldest inhabitants of Alton County.

Sam Dodd knew where it was, and Joe Muskrat, and perhaps a couple of others; that was all.

Dad emptied his rifle; reloaded and emptied it again, distributing the shots indiscriminately over the rock-littered slope below. There were no answering ones. Dad grunted his relief.

Standing there in the shade of the overhanging bowlder, realization had come to him that he was mixing in a quarrel which he knew nothing about. It was just as well, therefore, that he should not be called upon to shoot a man; at least, not until he knew what it was all about.

Assured that Sam had got well away, the old ex-sheriff finally backed cautiously off, and, keeping well out of sight behind the hog-backed ridge, made for the towering rock pile that hid Mad Muller's cabin. Pausing for one last inspection of the sun-lit valley, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the three men; they were circling the steep ridge, planning to come upon him from the rear.

Grinning, Dad strode away, consciousness of a job well done making pleasant little wrinkles about his eyes.

II.

It was dusk when he toiled wearily up the steep, weed-grown trail to Mad Muller's cabin. At a distance of a dozen yards, there was nothing to distinguish the stone shack from the irregular, moss-covered rock wall of the mountain.

Dad Williams found the entrance without difficulty, however. Crawling on hands and knees through the narrow opening that served as a doorway, he paused, staring at dark red splotches on the gray rock. Blood! Old Sam had preceded him. Was the poor old cuss injured?

His suspicions were quickly verified. Sam Dodd lay sprawled out, face down, on a moldy bunk, in a semi-stupor. All one side of his tattered khaki shirt was discolored with blood.

With skilled fingers, Dad explored the injury. It was not serious—just a flesh wound running along the ribs—but old Sam had lost much blood, and this, together with the physical exhaustion, had used up the last of the little man's resistance.

Dad dressed the wound as best he could. By the time the task was completed, Sam Dodd was gently raving. His pale eyes glared wildly. He shook a bony finger at Dad Williams.

"Ye'll never git me. Never, I tell you. Rob a pore ol' man, would ye, ye scum. I make a strike—fust one in thutty years—an' then— I didn't do nothin', I tell you. Never teched 'em, neither of 'em. They lied. It's a frame-up. I won't go with ye. Come an' git me, dang ye—"

Exhausted, Sam Dodd lay back on the bunk. Dad Williams whistled silently through his dry lips, and strove to reconstruct something that made sense out of the delirious man's ramblings—without success.

It was evident, however, that old Sam *was* in trouble; serious trouble of some kind. He had made a strike—so much seemed clear. But what then? And what could he, Dad Williams, do about it?

Nothing, certainly, just now. Chances were old Sam couldn't be moved for a day or so, anyhow. Meanwhile, his duty lay, right here, at the sick man's side.

All during the night Dad Williams sat on a rickety stool beside the ancient bunk, patiently tending the injured man. Toward morning, Sam Dodd slept, quietly, peacefully, the health-giving, profound slumber of a sick child, which sleeps its way back to health.

Dad Williams slept, too, propped uncomfortably against the wall at the foot of the bunk.

He came awake with a start—an inward start—no one, watching him, would have known that he was awake. He did not even open his eyes.

Nevertheless, he knew—just as surely as though his keen eyes had told him—that there was a third person in the room. A guttural grunt solved the mystery. Joe Muskrat!

The old Indian crouched in the cavern-like entrance to the cabin. His little bead-like eyes were fixed with a curious intentness on Dad Williams's face.

Sam Dodd was still sleeping. A shaft of sunlight crept in through a chink in the rocky wall, advertising the fact that a new day had come. After making sure that his patient was comfortable, Dad joined the silent Indian.

"Waal, you squint-eyed ol' sphinx, whut in heck you doin' here? Any news? But whut am I wastin' breath askin' you fer? Nothin' short of a earthquake would git you t' do anythin' else but grunt."

Joe Muskrat evidently had something on his mind, however. He mumbled unintelligibly at first.

Finally his vague thoughts found their way into words. Brief words, true, but startlingly potent.

"Sam in bad trouble, for sure. Deputy an' t'ree men chase 'em. No git."

Dad Williams gasped. "The law? D'you mean the law is after Sam Dodd?"

Joe Muskrat nodded solemnly.

"Jiminetty—whut fer, Joe?"

The old Indian merely shrugged. Evidently, he did not know—what for—and Dad realized that it really did not make much difference what the charge was.

The point was that Sam Dodd had got crosswise with the law, and he, Dad Williams, who confidently expected to be the next sheriff of Alton County, had openly aided a lawbreaker to escape.

To Dad Williams, whose faith in the infallibility of the law was childlike in its unquestioning sincerity, this action on his part constituted a downright catastrophe. How could he ever explain? He couldn't. He had blundered into things, without looking where he was going.

No excuse, there was no possible excuse for his foolhardiness. But who, knowing Sam Dodd, would ever have suspected that that simple mouse-hearted little man would ever have got in wrong with the law? It was almost beyond belief.

Still, the impossible had happened. And now—

Forgetful of the silent Indian's presence, forgetful even of Sam Dodd—the cause of it all—Dad Williams squatted on the dirt floor, cold pipe set tight between his teeth, his lean face wrinkled in troubled thought.

There was only one thing to do, this his worrying quickly told him; make a clean breast of it. Go to town, see Calderwood, and tell his story—everything—exactly as it had happened.

He would get scant sympathy from Gus Calderwood, and this individual could be trusted to use the information

to further his own ends; still, this was the only honorable way out. Dad Williams was known as a straightforward man, one who never lied, and above all, one who lived close within the letter of the law.

This latter was almost an obsession with him, developed, no doubt, during the ten years when he had served as sheriff of Alton County. Many of his constituents—particularly those who were sort of "on the fence"—would be surprised to hear of his fall from grace.

It would hurt him, right enough; probably definitely squash his chance of being elected to the office of sheriff in the fall.

With his mind made up, Dad Williams acted promptly.

"I'm goin' t' town, Joe. Be back by night. You stay here, an' kinda watch out fer Sam. He'll wake up, clear-headed, but a little weak. He oughtta be all hunky-dory by night. Tell him not t' worry, an' I'll be back—t'-night."

Shoulders stooped under the weight of his trouble, Dad Williams started out briskly toward Altonville. On the ridge where he had delayed Sam Dodd's pursuers the day before he came upon a man with a rifle, sprawled out in the sun behind a rock.

"Howdy, son?" Dad greeted.

The man, startled out of a half doze, sprang to his feet. As he came erect, Dad glimpsed a small nickel-plated star on the inner side of his vest.

"An officer, eh? An' who ye lookin' fer? I know these hills frum A t' Izzard; mebbe I kin help you."

Dad fumbled out his old pipe and stretched his long legs out comfortably on the ground. After a bit, the young deputy sheriff joined the old man, rolling a cigarette, while he searched the rocky walls above with squinting eyes.

"Yore Dad Williams, ain't you?" The deputy blew a funnel-shaped cloud of smoke skyward.

"Yep. Next sheriff o' Alton County."

The deputy grinned.

"Waal, we're lookin' fer a old coot called Sam Dodd. Nearly had him yistiddy. Followed him up t' this ridge, then he got holt of a gun some place, an' tore into us. We circled aroun', figurin' t' come on him frum the rear, but by the time we'd done it, he was gone. Plumb vanished.

"Never seen nothin' like it. Don't know whar he could hev went. Cain't be fur away, though; me, I'm assigned t' watch this here ridge. Likely I'll nab him afore night."

"Yeah, shore." Dad Williams's wrinkle-hidden eyes twinkled with relief. They didn't know then that he was the one who had aided Sam Dodd to escape; evidently they didn't even suspect that a second person had entered into the affair.

"Ol' Sam Dodd, eh? W'y, shore, I know Sam well—a pore, hard-luck, ol' feller; but he wouldn't hurt a mouse. Whut did he do t' git in wrong with the law?"

"I don't know the whole story, but, it seems a couple fellers from Denver, I think, bought up that strip o' land—includin' Tayo Lake, an' thet rock pile, too, whar ol' Sam's cabin is. They figured on startin' a dude ranch up thar.

"Waal, Sam, he didn't have no right t' thet land; he'd never bothered about no government grant, 'r nothin' like thet; he jest squatted thar. Them two fellers seem right sociable critters; they swore they never bothered ol' Sam, jest told him thet some day he'd hev t' figure on movin', becuz his ramshackle ol' hut kind of messed up the landscape.

"He got ugly, and started takin' pot shots at them two fellers frum behin' trees an' rocks, an' sech like. Didn't do no damage, he didn't, first off. Gus found out about it an' warned ol' Sam. An' then, finally, Sam plugged one of the fellers; bruk his jaw with a six-gun

slug, an' then the other feller swore out a warrant, an' we went after Sam.

"An' there you have it. Allus kinda figured myself as how the ol' rooster was kind of a harmless ol' cuss, but, doggone, he shore has been a slippery one.

"Y'never kin tell whut a man's got inside of him until somebody pokes him on the nose. Ol' Sam seen his place bein' taken away from him, an', man, he developed into a hell-raiser fer shore."

"Shore did. But, like you say, I never figured Sam was a trouble-maker. Is thet the whole story? Did Calderwood go up thar an' look things over? There's allus two sides t' every story, you know."

"No, I don't think Gus went up thar at all. We been purty busy down Lava Butte way with them rustlers. But, like I said, I don't know the whole story—on'y jest pieces of it—I breezed in yistiddy mornin, an' Gus says, 'Go git Sam Dodd,' an' I went. 'Tain't likely Gus has been up thar, though; quite a trip fer Gus, now thet he weighs close t' three hundred pounds."

"Yeah, har, har! Gus, he shore is gettin' plump. Waal, son, I ain't got much t' do t'-day, I think I'll mosey up Sam Dodd's way an' kinda look things over. 'Tain't none o' my business, but Sam is a friend o' mine, an'—an'—they's allus a chance of a misunderstandin'.

"Don't suppose you could come along with me?" Dad added. "No? Waal, I won't mess into things, an' if I find out anythin', I'll let you know. You seem like a right bright lad; mebbe you an' me 'll see more of each other. How'd you like a job as deputy with Dad Williams?"

"Fust rate."

"Good enough. An' if you kin swing any votes my way this fall, w'y, they'll shore be appreciated."

Dad could never resist the temptation to do a little electioneering whenever the chance presented. Chances were that he would need every odd vote he could muster.

III.

It was midday when Dad caught sight of Tayo Lake, nestling coolly in a cup-shaped valley surrounded by groves of towering spruce and pine. Not a bad place for a dude ranch at that, Dad thought.

Sure was pretty. And Sam Dodd's dilapidated old shack, up there in the very center of things, *was* an eyesore. No wonder the two strangers objected to it, and they were, without doubt, within their rights.

Old Sam was a squatter, and, if he had a valuable prospect—as his rambling talk had seemed to indicate—he had not registered on it. It was a well known fact that Sam Dodd had never registered on any one of his many prospects uncovered during the past thirty years; always afraid of being robbed, Sam was; figured that if he kept the location of his find to himself no one would try to run him out.

Dad approached Sam Dodd's cabin in a circuitous manner, keeping well hidden within the shelter of the black forest. He could not have told why he did this; as a matter of fact, he could not have told why he had decided to come to Tayo Lake in the first place, instead of going on to town as he had planned. Just a hunch—

Dad stopped suddenly, and, head on one side, listened intently. Just ahead was a break in the thicket, spanned by a rocky gorge perhaps two hundred yards across..

The metallic clatter of shovel and pick in gravelly earth, came faintly to him. Down there, just ahead, was Sam Dodd's claim—at least that was where the old miner had been working the last time Dad Williams had called at Tayo Lake. And now, some one else was working Sam Dodd's claim.

As Dad hesitated, the clatter ceased.

A man's head appeared above a jagged rock some distance away.

"All clear," the man said. The head disappeared and the clattering soon began again.

Dad whistled softly through his teeth. Claim jumpers! He fingered his rifle uncertainly.

No, he was in no position to start anything yet. Even if some one *was* working Sam Dodd's claim there was nothing he could do about it, according to law.

In the first place, the law did not recognize Sam Dodd's ownership of that claim, inasmuch as the chances were a hundred to one that he had not registered on it. It was, therefore, the property of the first man who filed on it.

Still, every one in Alton County knew that this was Sam Dodd's prospect, and none but a crook would do what these men were doing.

Dad circled about by Sam's cabin and dropped his rifle behind a cedar clump just outside the door—just as well as if he didn't look like a walking arsenal—then he started noisily toward the spot where the men were working.

They heard him before he came in sight, as he had intended they should. They were waiting for him as he clambered down over the rocks.

There were two of them. City men, Dad promptly decided, despite their rough clothes and dirt-smeared faces, they bore, unmistakably, the stamp of strangers to this wilderness land.

Both were plump and prosperous looking; the one, slightly older than his companion with hair graying at the temples, fumbled with a strip of loose adhesive tape, which stretched across the lower part of his face. This must be the man whom old Sam had shot—the two strangers—from Denver—

"Howdy, boys?" Dad greeted. "Whar's ol' Sam?"

The men exchanged quick glances. But there certainly was nothing arbitrary or suspicious looking in their visitor's appearance—just another simple-minded old desert rat.

"I'm called Williams," Dad continued quickly. "Everybody aroun' here knows Dad Williams."

He grinned, disarmingly, but his quick eyes watched the two men closely as he stretched out a lean hand in greeting. Apparently his name meant nothing to them.

The man with the bandaged face took the proffered hand.

"My name's—Jones," he said, "and this is Steve—er—ah—Merton, my partner."

"Pleased t' meetcha," Dad mumbled. He noted that the hands he gripped were soft and covered with newly formed blisters. "An' whar did you say ol' Sam was?"

"Didn't say," Jones answered. "He ought to be in jail, though, by this time. Hope he is, too—the old devil." He rubbed his sore jaw gently.

"Jail? Ol' Sam—in jail?" Dad was properly incredulous.

"That's right. But it's quite a story. You're probably a friend of his? Well, we're strangers and we're anxious that this trouble we've had with old Sam be well understood. Don't want to get off on the wrong foot, understand? We're quitting for the day now; how about joining us in a bite to eat? Tell you all about old Sam after supper."

"Shore. Whut you diggin' fer?"

"Why—er—ah—I'm somewhat of a geologist—on the side. Thought I discovered a trace of tungsten; lots of scheelite around here."

"Yeah?"

Dad tramped along behind the two men to Sam Dodd's cabin. Here he automatically took over the burden of preparing supper, while the two men washed with much soap and water, and finally shaved and changed their clothes.

As he worked, Dad's thoughts were busy ones. Where had he seen these two men before? Both were familiar

in a vague sort of way, but he could not positively place either of them.

This in itself was unusual, for Dad Williams owned a remarkable memory for faces. The fact that he knew these two men, but could not place them, piqued him; perhaps he *was* getting old —too old—as his political opponents so liked to point out?

Still, their identity would come to him soon, he was sure, and meanwhile there was one other circumstance that interested him. That wound on Jones's jaw had undoubtedly been caused by a bullet, but the shot had entered *underneath* the man's chin, and had come out through his cheek.

How could that bullet have followed such an unusual course? The man must have been lying on his back when hit.

This was highly improbable. Under what circumstances, then, could that curious wound have been inflicted? With increasing mystification, Dad considered the various possibilities.

His thoughts were interrupted, temporarily, by a startling discovery. His rifle, which he had left, well hidden, just outside the cabin, was gone!

Absence of the gun, in itself, did not bother Dad particularly—he still had two guns, one of them in evidence, the other secreted beneath his vest—but, the circumstances under which it had disappeared, *did* trouble him. He had been working about an open fire not a dozen yards from that rifle; some one had taken the gun out from under his very nose, and Dad thought well enough of his own abilities to grant that the theft of that gun was a clever job.

These two men were smooth ones. He would do well to watch his step.

"Didn't intend for you to do all the work, old timer, but you seemed willing, and Jean and I are rotten cooks—"

This was the man, Jones, talking; he stood in the doorway of the cabin, smooth shaven, and dressed in a white shirt and a blue suit.

Dad, bending over the little fire, did not move, at once. Jean, Jean, Jean—the name ran through his mind in a bewildering circle, striking, striking against the closed door of his memory.

Jones had first said that his partner's name was Steve—Steve Merton. Now he called his friend—Jean. Jean, Jean what? That name — coupled with a last name that persistently evaded him —was familiar—

Dad straightened suddenly. Both men now stood in the doorway, watching hungrily as Dad manipulated a venison steak over the open fire.

A spread of orange light from the setting sun set them off in clear, clean outline against the blackness within the cabin. And, in that single glance, the cobwebs cleared away from Dad's memory.

He knew them both, now—Henry Mossin and Jean Cudjo—convicts both —recently escaped from the State prison at Pine Valley. It was the shave and the city clothes that had made recognition possible.

The pictures he had seen six months since, showed both men in store clothes. Dirty and whiskered, dressed in khaki as he had first seen them, chances were he never would have recognized them.

His heart pounding with excitement, Dad sat at table with his unsavory hosts. Although he was exceedingly hungry, he found it impossible to eat.

These two crooks had come to this remote spot with the double purpose of hiding from the law, and robbing old Sam Dodd. The fact that both of them were convicted criminals, automatically nullified their ownership in old Sam's claim, assuming, of course, that they had filed on it.

His course of action was clear. There was no chance of his doing the wrong thing, now; he knew them, absolutely.

And it would help him at the election to have brought these men in—to have shown up Calderwood—

A noise as of stumbling feet sound-

ed outside the cabin. Both men listened intently. Dad listened, too.

Being nearest the door, he came to his feet. Now was his chance.

"What was that?" he asked incuriously.

He walked to the door, slowly, the long fingers of one hand reaching tentatively downward and backward toward his gun. There was a quick, slapping step behind him. The gun butt was jerked out from under his very fingers.

The instant the gun left the holster, he turned. The tip of the barrel stuck, just for an instant, and, within that instant, Dad snatched the second gun from beneath his vest and fired from the hip.

The shot struck Mossin in the wrist. The man yelled. The gun flew from his fingers. Jean Cudjo dropped behind the table.

Dad sent two shots in spanking succession, one on either side of the spot where Cudjo crouched, hidden in shadow, then he dodged aside. A fusillade of shots from Cudjo's automatic, answered.

All of them thudded harmlessly into the log wall several feet away. Dad stretched a long leg out of the shadows and kicked over the flimsy table.

Cudjo crouched against the wall, fumbling with his automatic pistol, which had apparently jammed.

"Stick 'em up, Cudjo! You, too, Mossin!"

Both men obeyed with alacrity.

"Don't start no talkin' now. I cain't argue wuth a damn. I know you both, an' we're startin', pronto, fer Altonville."

Calmly, unhurriedly, Dad bound Cudjo's hands securely behind his back. Mossin's arm was smashed at the wrist. He seemed stunned.

Dad recalled that Mossin was a clever cracksman. Evidently the possible loss of his right hand impressed him greatly. It was Cudjo who first regained his composure.

"Listen here, pop. We—"

But once more came that noisy clatter of footsteps, just outside the cabin. Dad edged away from the open doorway, just as a black rifle barrel poked inside.

Without an instant's hesitation, Dad knocked the gun barrel down, seized it and jerked strongly, forward and down. The other end of the rifle gave way easily.

A man stumbled into the cabin and, still clutching the rifle—Dad's new Winchester — sprawled face down on the floor.

"Sam Dodd!" Dad gasped. "W'y, you danged ol' idjit—whut you doin' here?"

Old Sam raised a white face glistening with the sweat of weakness. His wavering glance took in the trussed up Cudjo; Mossin, clutching his bleeding arm—and Dad Williams.

"You—you—you—" Words evaded him. He clambered up on a chair, relinquishing the rifle to Dad's insistent grip.

"You, whut?" Dad was angry. Old Sam needed a lesson.

"You ain't in on this, too, be you, Dad? You ain't aimin' on robbin' me? No, no—o' course you ain't. But, I thought—mebbe—cain't trust nobody these days. An' I'm rich, Dad; thet claim is richer'n all git out; half a million, easy—"

"Waal, whut of it? 'Tain't yourn."

"'Tis."

"Not till you register on it."

"Waal, you know how I feel about sich things—"

"Yeah, an' I know yo're goin' t' start feelin' different right soon. Yo're goin' t' town with me, right now an' register on thet claim. Ef you don't I'll file on it myself."

With his troubles over, new life seemed to flow through Sam Dodd's overtaxed body. On the way to Altonville with the silent prisoners, he cleared up several points on which Dad was still hazy.

He had known from the first that Mossin and Cudjo had intended robbing him—that is, from the first day they had appeared at Tayo Lake. For over a year he had been taking valuable dust out of his claim; he had banked it at Spartown, thirty miles to the north, not daring to appear in Altonville—where every one knew him—for fear news of his rich find would bring a stampede down upon the Tayo Lake district.

In Spartown, Mossin and Cudjo had seen him one day at the local bank. They had followed him. And that same fear of discovery of his riches had influenced him to try to fight his own battles.

He had not appealed to the sheriff. Instead, he had attempted to intimidate the two men.

"—An' did you shoot that feller in the jaw, Sam?"

"Naw. He done thet hisself. I seen him. He was foolin' with thet danged little automatic o' hisn—it jammed while he was shootin' bottles offn a rock—an' it went off an' that's how he got that slug in his jaw."

Dad laughed. He turned to Mossin. "'S thet right, Henry?"

The surly Mossin, nodded.

The lights of Altonville appeared through a sparse thicket of cottonwoods. Dad seized Sam Dodd's thin arm in a crushing grip.

"Remember, you ol' wedgehead—yo're registerin' on thet claim the minute you hit town. Done caused me enough trouble already, you hev; nigh got me into a turrible mess—me a workin' plumb ag'in' the law an' everythin'—jest on account o' yore fool notions—"

"Y' betcha, Dad—I'll do it. I'm registerin' on that claim right away, an'—an'—I aim on votin' this fall, Dad—fust time in thutty years. An' I'll be votin' fer Dad Williams fer sheriff."

And grinning, the little man sidled away down the street.

THE END

BACK OF THE BASEBALL BUSINESS

'Way back in ARGOSY for December 29, 1888, we find this item:

> The baseball magnates have reduced the salaries of players to a maximum figure of two thousand five hundred dollars. This is a hard blow to many deserving young men who have devoted their days to a study of ball in our colleges, in the expectation of following it up professionally.

Though the maximum figure of our own day, the seventy-thousand-dollar salary of Babe Ruth, is twenty-eight times as large, Heywood Broun, the noted New York *World* columnist, protests that most baseball players get only a faction of their fair share of the gate receipts, and cites the high prices for which owners will buy players to back up his argument that most players are worth much more than the small salary which is usually kept secret by the club secretary.

However, the peculiarity of organized baseball that we should expect complaint about is that baseball uses the terms of slavery to describe the mechanics of its shifting of players from one club to another.

The fans of our country have become so used to reading and hearing that some talented young athlete who is burning up the base paths has been "sold" by one club and "bought" by another that they never take the time to realize how offensive such terminology must be.

Actually, when a ball player is "sold" it means that the privilege of hiring him has been given to the club which is said to have "bought" him.

Of course, organized baseball decrees that he must play for the club designated or not play at all. This occasionally works hardships on men who, for family reasons, find it irksome to move to the city of the club which has just bought them.

His Service to Folly

By MORGAN MANSFIELD

Primed for high adventure, he had to act as clown for an emperor he despised, and match wits with mighty ruffians

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II

BASIL TRELAWNEY, son of a famous Cornish gun-making family, follows his French sweetheart, Violette de Tourraine, to Santo Domingo, when her ill-advised Royalist father takes to that island, then under the perilous rule of the black emperor, Henri Christophe. Basil reaches Santo Domingo on the pirate ship of the Baron de Banana, whose enmity he incurs. However, he has Jack Butts, one of his father's ship's officers, with him; and makes a friend of Gefondo, a hunchback, powerful in Santo Domingo. With the eventual hope of becoming the emperor's jester, Basil has to sing and dance—for his life.

CHAPTER IX *(Continued).*

WITH CAP AND BELLS.

THERE was a riotous clapping of hands and stamping of feet, led by Gefondo, when Basil swept the ground with his cloak and would have stepped from the circle. But he was not permitted to retire. At a word from Emperor Henri Christophe, the coach door was opened and he was motioned to the forward seat.

Basil drew back. He would not leave Violette. He fell on one knee before the emperor; he who had scoffed when De Banana prophesied such a situation!

"If I have amused your majesty," he said, "I pray you grant me one boon—that my lady may come with me and her aged father."

He had spoken in French, but as if to show his gifts the emperor answered him in fair English.

"We take no wives to Bonnet L'Évêque, Sir Fool. The lady stays at Sans Souci until I sift this matter of marriage."

Basil slowly got to his feet, his face drawn and haggard. It was of no use

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for March 31

to plead or protest. His eyes turned, fell on Gefondo, pleading silently for the hunchback to help him. Then he saw Gefondo gazing at the red-headed giant beside him, and Basil clutched at that frail straw.

"Then, majesty, pray grant a lesser boon. Allow this man to go with my lady as bodyguard. For women of France, and most especially this frail lady, are timid among strangers. But he has hair not unlike her own in color, a trifle ruddier only; and he is strong enough to carry her."

The head of Emperor Christophe nodded; then impatiently he pointed to the coach. Basil flew to Violette, brushed her hand to his lips just as Jack Butts, urged by Gefondo, stepped to her side.

The big Cornishman's pigtail had been severed. His red hair stood in a fury about his face, which had been stained, as well as his whole body, to black.

He wore a loin cloth of blue and a seaman's kerchief bound about his forehead. In his belt was thrust a murderous looking knife, and his hand touched its hilt.

"To the death, lad!" he muttered between his teeth, then, catching up the half fainting Violette, he swung toward the carriage beyond, followed by her father, De Tourraine.

The Baron de Banana, whose jowls were purple from the shame of listening to that song deriding him, sputtered his way to the closed coach door just as Basil slumped on the forward cushion, glad now of any rest because his legs tottered under him.

"Your gracious majesty," stuttered De Banana, and got no further. His hands clung to the window frame, and the clenched fist of the emperor pounded down on his fingers.

He swayed and fell aside as the horses plunged ahead and the coach rolled on, circling the house and emerging again on the road, followed by a line of carriages, in one of which Violette clung to her father, and Jack Butts blinked in bewilderment at the swift changes of scenes into which he had been hurled.

"Palmetto wine, that hunchback gave me to drink," he muttered. "'Tis a heady drink, I swear."

A scream from Violette silenced his musing aloud.

"M'sieu', you speak the tongue of Angleterre."

"Aye, lady. I'm a Cornishman, across the channel from your land. I followed the lad Trelawney, and got into the mess. They've blacked me like themselves, and I've near lost what wits I had from watching dreadful sights in the woods with that tongueless ape who sought out Gefondo and led us to their great fire.

"But I'm no blackamoor. And if my brawn can serve you, rest certain that for the lad's sake they'll only torment you over the dead body of Jack Butts."

Violette laughed in hysteria of relief. She took his big rough hand between her own white palms, and Jack felt hot tears falling on his fingers.

"Tell me, what is the meaning of all this? I was so pleased when they welcomed us with such display. You see, my kinsman, who owned great estates here, died suddenly, and the land was left to me. France was in such a turmoil that we came here to this haven. Haven, did I say? 'Tis anything but that."

"They decided to wife you with De Banana, I take it." Jack rubbed his shock of hair. "I don't rightly understand it all, but anyways I'm here, and your father's here. Between us we will keep you safe until the lad is ready for his bride."

"Bride? You mean young Trelawney?" exploded the marquis, his voice still quavering from the ordeal through which they had passed. "She'll wed no man whose father sells guns to fight France."

"Faith, an' those last outpourings

of his molds are on Le Diable Noir, ready for this black emperor to slaughter white folks with. It's the French whichever way they point, with only this difference: that in France they kill, and here they torture and despoil. I wish the lad was safe here with me."

Jack Butts's mutterings drifted into sighs and silence, and the only sound was that of horses' hoofs beating on the hard earth and crunch of wheels on gravel.

In the emperor's carriage Basil waited in the grip of paralyzing uncertainty, hearing the rumbling noises made by Christophe from time to time. Sometimes he smacked his big lips and occasionally he muttered in his throat. Then a chortle of mirth escaped him, and he slapped his leg.

"You will teach me that song, Sir Fool," he said at length. "My musicians will play the tune when De Banana comes to court. And you shall make a like song about other suppliants for my favors, the Duke of Limonade, the Baron de Fromage, and Duc de Carotte.

"And at Sans Souci there is Milady Chat, Duchess Petit Feu, though she will match your wit. We'll have you make a chanson for my queen, whom I call 'Pain au Beurre' because when all the others weary me like too much caviar and champagne I turn to her for substance, the bread and butter a soldier needs for strength on which to fight."

A formidable program was being planned for Basil's talents. He could only murmur:

"*Oui, votre majesté—merci beaucoup.*"

The road they traveled became steep. He heard the driver's whip and shouting at the horses. From the coach windows he saw mountain peaks against the stars, streaked with limestone white as snow, and gleams of light in the valley.

Then as the road twisted there appeared a blaze of light high up on the mountainside, but they wound and rode many miles before they reached the glory of Sans Souci.

It shone under silver starlight, like palaces of France, white stone towers and turrets against the velvet dark hills. Flambeaux in sconces lighted terraced gardens. Fountains showered silver spray. White marble nymphs and fauns and nereids gleamed against the shrubbery.

On its verandas was a moving scarf of color made by women's dresses. Then, as they came nearer, there was the sound of music and a procession formed on the lawns to greet the emperor.

His carriage came to a stop before the center terrace. Basil saw a bevy of women dressed in flowered silks, grouped about a fat black queen, who was seated. Immediately a dancer appeared on a balcony, seemed to float down on white gossamers which she flung high in the air, and began a dance of such beauty and grace that in spite of his overwhelming apprehension Trelawney was fascinated.

"*Le petit feu!*" announced the emperor. "Think you, you can match her art, Sir Fool?"

"Her art, but not her beauty, highness," said Basil. He was suddenly sick. The dancer was as white and golden-haired as Violette. Her limbs were bare and about her body hung a flittering sheath of tight-fitting fabric sewn with diamonds. Gossamers floated from her arms like wraiths of silver mist as she whirled and pirouetted, then ran to the shrubbery and disappeared.

"She might be empress," said Christophe. "But that 'bread and butter' of mine will not risk me a chance to broach the subject. She's a jealous femme, that wife of mine. And the dancer, she says, is quite mad.

"She came here just when Dessalines died. An accident overtook her parents and young sister. They were a performing troupe of dancers. She

saw their dead bodies and lost her reason, but I fancy it has made her lighter on her feet."

The pity of the story clutched at Basil's heart. He guessed the nature of that "accident" which had overtaken the performing troupe of dancers and left this girl at the mercy of the black emperor.

It seemed to Trelawney that her insanity was a mercy granted by heaven. But the sight of her brought him to thoughts of Violette and a greater fear that would not be silenced. He even gained courage to speak to Christophe of her.

"The Lady Marquise de Tourraine—" he began.

"Silence, fool. Speak not until you are spoken to. She'll be kept here with my empress until I decide what disposal to make of her." He leaned from the coach to greet his fat queen, who came slowly, ponderously down the walk, and leaned her bare black arms on the coach window, looking at Christophe with a countenance more remarkable for good nature than intelligence.

"A new and amusing addition to the court," announced the emperor, waving his hand toward Basil. "I've christened him 'Sir Fool.' He'll dance for you at Sans Souci some day. But tonight we move on to Bonnet L'Évêque. I leave the French woman in your charge, my Bread-and-Butter. I shall be busy having those cannon brought up and placed."

"Henri, my Honeysuckle," she said affectionately, returning his kiss with a resounding smack of her lips, "I go with you. There is a priest at Limonade stirring up trouble and speaking against my emperor. Also it is whispered that ghosts walk again; Sans Souci and Dessalines were seen—"

"Mon Dieu! We'll have this priest to account for treason," he roared. "Drive on. The road to the Citadel is steep and the night is far advanced. Au revoir, my Bread-and-Butter. I only wish my cares were as light as yours."

"Henri," she cried, "I go with you. I have waited until you came to tell you of trouble started by this priest. Would you leave me here to be butchered in my sleep by white rats that creep from their sewers in the dark and gnaw the foundations of your power? Is that a way to treat your empress? Open the coach door, varlet."

The postilion looked in trepidation from her to the emperor, evidently quite as much in awe of the huge black woman as her lord. It was plain to Basil that Emperor Christophe might rule his subjects with a hand of steel, but not his queen, for she wrenched at the coach knob and swung the door wide, scrambling in and pushing the emperor over to make room on the cushion.

Basil drew his feet aside to accommodate her voluminous skirts, and the movement drew her attention and anger on himself.

"Ride outside," she commanded, pointing with a fat hand that glittered with jewels.

Glad to escape, he swung to the seat beside the driver, but not beyond earshot of the emperor's loud voice answering the querulous demands of his lady.

"You go to meet a ship, and fetch back a Frenchwoman, Henri. Are the Citadel dungeons so crowded that we must keep prisoners at Sans Souci?"

"She was to marry De Banana, but I find she is already claimed by the jester you have bundled out of the coach," complained the emperor. "I could not well marry her again with a living husband."

"Undo the marriage by your royal decree. Let that ill-smelling dog of a De Banana have his white-faced doll. And why should you take this enemy in your coach even if he is her mate?"

"My Honey-hive, a woman never understands these matters. He is an

Englishman, and we are not at war with England. Besides, he sings and dances well and amuses me. I grow weary of affairs of state and troubles never ending. I'll have him dance for you, my Jam-pot. You'll burst your stays laughing."

His voice was wheedling, but his lady was not to be cajoled readily. Under whips of the drivers the horses plunged and panted on the steep grades and the heavy coach rolled alarmingly.

"It is a sign of evil portent when ghosts are seen," went on the queen. "I'll keep this Frenchwoman with my ladies. You were always willing to try the advice of that fool, De Marmalade, about contenting the submissive whites by giving Haiti a white queen."

"My Honey-hive, my Sugar-cane, I have said she was already wed and to this Englishman I've made jester for my throne. But you say that Dessalines and Sans Souci have been seen. They are dead so long 'twould seem they might stay quiet.

"And if any man sees ghosts, it should be that rogue De Banana at Plantation Grand Pré. I had no hand in the death of Dessalines—and I regret the hasty taking off of Sans Souci. He hated to die, my Bread-and-Butter. And because he loved Grand Pré, he might come back there from Purgatory. Dessalines and Sans Souci, you say—and their ghosts walk."

From the strangely awed tone of his mutterings, Basil knew that fear had him by the throat. Christophe was childishly superstitious, and grew more alarmed over the possibility of ghosts walking than the real peril of discontent among his conquered enemies on the island and courageous denunciation of the priest at Limonade.

On the driver's seat, swaying with the coach, Basil pieced together bits of a puzzle, the keynote of which was that name of "Grand Pré."

The château of Tourraines near Rouen had that same name. It was also the home of Violette's kinsmen in Haiti, a plantation ravaged by Christophe, its owner foully murdered and the estates given to De Banana.

Another crime in the long score. And already vengeance was in pursuit. The ghosts of conscience troubled Christophe!

CHAPTER X.

THE DRUMS OF HAITI.

AS Basil followed the emperor over the paved courtyard of the Citadel, which crowned like a close-fitting cap the cliffs of Bonnet L'Évêque, the arduous exertions of the long day seemed suddenly to drop a weight of weariness over his mind and body.

Excitement and danger had kept him alert, but he was no longer able to feel either fear or caution, nor even amazement at the marvelous engineering which erected this fortress of stone that had been quarried and hauled by man-power up the terrible and steep hill roads.

The huge gates clanged shut after the carriages. Great doors of the inner walls swung open. Torches, carried by black retainers clad in bright colors, made a path of smoky flickering light.

Inside the passageway, Basil felt the chill of its stone walls which glistened with moisture and were green-veined with fungus growth between the hewn blocks of masonry.

Then as they threaded a winding trail which led to the stairs, he gained some idea of the wall thickness. The whole fortress had the aspect of a prison. It was built in a long triangle, and they went toward the apex which pointed north.

Here was a great hall, well lighted, with fires blazing in open hearths, and a long table spread with heavy damask. Lights shone on silver and crystal. There was the ruby gleam of Bohemian glassware, and the rare blue of

Italian goblets and jugs of silver inlaid with gems.

Couches ranged along the walls were piled high with cushions of red and blue, the royal colors. A great chair stood at the head of the table and was draped with the same colors. Servitors appeared at once with salvers containing roast fowls and whole legs of sheep and pork.

The music of horns and flutes began with the rhythmic throb of tom-toms. It was the first time Basil had heard the pulsing fervor of the drums of Haiti. He felt it warming his blood like wine, as if whips of sound lashed his flesh and fired him with an overwhelming desire to dance.

Emperor Christophe was scarcely seated, and Basil still waited for an opportunity to find himself a chair or be ordered elsewhere, when to the wilder beating of tom-toms and more strenuous melodies of the wind instruments a company of men marched in.

They were clad in gold-laced uniforms of every hue, wearing decorations of jewels and hats with high cockades. They bowed to the emperor and seated themselves. Then an officer of lesser rank called the roll, and Basil heard many strange sounding titles.

He recognized his enemy of Le Diable Noir, the Baron de Banana, as one of those placed nearest the emperor's chair; but the baron took no notice of the cloaked young figure standing along one wall.

Manners at that board were crude. They ate rapidly, greedily, and talked in a tongue Basil did not understand, a mixture of French, Spanish, and native words, uncouth and guttural. The excitement seemed to have spoiled the appetite of Christophe, and he talked more industriously than he ate. In his conversation, directed to his closest neighbors, Basil caught the name of Grand Pré, Limonade, Frère Mathieu. He was certain the emperor discussed that news imparted by his queen.

When their appetites were somewhat appeased, each man rose and gave a report, for the most part of pleasant news. Basil, who had spent the day running through the jungle, then experienced the joy of reunion with Violette, and danced for his life, was feeling his legs sag under him when Christophe gave the signal to rise, and his eyes fell on Trelawney.

He motioned him toward the table, but Basil bowed from the waist and remained where he stood. However, the whole company was eying him, and De Banana caught up a sheep shank from a platter and tossed it.

He was too drunk from recent potations to aim straight, and it fell some distance from young Trelawney, who picked it up and tossed it back.

"A wise cur buries a bone so he may find it again to gnaw," he cried.

Emperor Christophe laughed uproariously and his mirth led the others to loud shrieks of merriment.

"Sir Fool, we've let you stand alone too long. Come, drink our health!"

"Your health, majesty, is the only health which matters," said Trelawney, and bowed again. But he came near the emperor's chair and took a goblet filled by a servitor. "Brave wine, to a brave man," he cried in all honesty.

No man could doubt the courage of Henri Christophe. In view of their strange meeting, Basil knew the emperor had been gracious toward him. He could have enjoyed this adventure if it had not been for his great fear for Violette and a feeling of repugnance in acting as an entertainer by compulsion for a black man. It was like fencing with unbuttoned foils and no ill will.

How soon the emperor's indifference might turn to animosity when De Banana gained an audience in private Basil did not know. But it seemed to him that if a half-breed of such craven spirits as De Banana could command a place at court, he by his own wits might effect the rescue of Violette,

contrive their escape, and his own vindication in Cornwall.

At best, it was a choice between that triumph and an ignominious death. Christophe had seemed pleased with his toast of "brave wine to a brave man."

"Sir Fool," he said, "you've made songs to other men; make one now for us. I've heard enough of trouble for one night. Tell us how you came to win the heart of this French maid who arrived to-day to claim Grand Pré, and disappointed our De Banana, who hoped to have both wife and lands to-night."

Emperor Christophe spoke fairly fluent French, although it was provincial.

"Disappointed to-night, perhaps," broke in De Banana. "But I am a patient man. I can await the lady's pleasure."

"The word 'mañana,' said Basil, "rimes well with Banana." He did not wait for a retort, but broke at once into a song, the words of which seemed to spring spontaneously from his heart:

"I cannot tell why birds in spring
Their sweetest songs trill forth and sing.
I cannot say why maids and men
Seek mates that Heaven made for them.
I cannot tell why happiness
I've won is other men's distress.
But this I know, till death divide,
Her heart is mine, whate'er betide."

He did not cease, but broke again into that sonorous tempo of the march he had played when Jack Butts sang the words on board the pirate ship, Le Diable Noir, "March of the Men of Harlech."

And, recalling the emperor's command for a song about himself, Basil set the tune ringing, and the tom-tom players, whose hands had been feeling vainly for the tempo of the love song just ended, set a quivering throb of drums which caught the swing of the tune and marched tempestuously with his voice.

It seemed to Basil that while life should last he would always hear those drums.

"Mighty King of San Domingo, lord
of mountain and of valley,
Reign while fate shall set a tally over
power you've won.
Time alone can settle feuds that try
men's mettle,
Passing years all doubt shall clear of
bravery's untried fettle.
Here in state and splendor reign, Oh,
mighty lord of San Domingo,
Beat the drums and let bells ring, Oh,
king of Haiti's sun."

It was evident that the emperor did not completely understand the meaning of the phrase, but he was mightily pleased, and called a servant to fill Basil's cup again.

"To-morrow you'll teach it to my musicians," he said. "Now, my lords of council shall be excused. And, Sir Fool, you'll go with me and tell tales. For sleep has not come readily of late. Perhaps your voice will woo that rest which eludes an emperor."

There was an instant rising from chairs about the table and running to form a line of state through which the emperor passed, followed by Basil, with tom-toms beating time and wild barbaric music breaking into loud acclaim.

They entered the emperor's bedroom, and Basil stood while attendants disrobed Christophe and clad him again in garments of bright pink silk. A magnificent bed was uncovered; then a man summoned a servitor, who carried a salver with bottles and glasses.

Basil knew that the visit of a physician was in progress. Medicines were mixed, tasted first by the doctor, then given to the emperor, who made wry faces as he drank the doses.

Guards in splendid uniforms stood at the head and foot of the bed. Henri Christophe was deep in his pillows before he summoned Basil to a stool at the bedside and bade him begin the entertainment.

Trelawney had been racking his brain for tales to tell. He thought of those old folk tales of Cornwall, of "Jack the Giant Killer," and, adding his own details and coloring, he made of them a never ending story, for he remembered a certain lady of the Orient who prolonged her life by telling unending tales to a sultan.

It was not long before the emperor snored. The guards still stood like automatons, and the black physician waited at one side of the room, evidently interested in Trelawney's tales, which he translated into such French as he could command for their understanding.

He was weary to exhaustion, his voice sank to a whisper when suddenly the emperor's body jerked and he twisted as if in the clutch of a nightmare.

"Away!" he cried. "Get back, Sans Souci, and hide those finger marks on your throat. Get back to purgatory. I'll have amends made to your soul, in church—and lay your spirit. I swear it by my royal word!

"Take him away!" he screamed, sitting bolt upright and fighting the phantoms of his dream. "There's Dessalines—come to haunt me—Dessalines and Sans Souci. Take them away!"

The physician sprang to his side, but the arm of the emperor swept him back. His eyes were open and rolling so that only the whites were visible, streaked with red veins. His thick lips were blue from constriction of the heart. They drew back, showing his blue gums and white teeth set in an animal snarl.

The doctor clutched his shoulder and shook him awake. But Christophe was still in the thrall of fear bred of those ghosts of conscience troubling him. He turned in fury on the physician, called to the huge black men guarding his couch, and, pointing to a wall hung with Gobelin tapestry, cried in his loud voice:

"This dog's physic has made me dream. To the slide with him. He's poisoned Christophe!"

The wretched victim of his imperial displeasure screamed piteously. He threw himself on his knees and pleaded with wild cries for mercy. But the guards dragged him, kicking and struggling toward the wall.

They drew back the tapestry and opened a door in one panel, disclosing a yawning black gap in the masonry. Then lifting the physician, they inserted him, head down, and sent him hurtling and screaming to his death.

Basil sat as if frozen to the stool. The emperor's gaze turned on him. The guards closed the wall aperture and swung the tapestry into place.

"So die all foes of Christophe!" announced the emperor. "Sing love songs, fool, and drive away the phantoms of the night. Your voice is pleasant. I slept awhile ago. But the physic of that rogue disturbed my mind. Christophe is not afraid of ghosts or dreams."

He seemed to comfort himself with that assurance. Basil could not sing, but he fitted the tales he had been relating to a tune so familiar that it sang itself, and at last the eyes of the emperor closed.

Only when his breathing became regular and deep did a guard near the door beckon Basil from the room, and once outside another servitor escorted him to a chamber far down the passageway.

Here he found a feminine softness of furnishings, a lace-covered couch, and lace curtains at the window, through which he saw the sky flushed by dawn light.

The stars were gone. It was early day. Basil stripped to that fine linen provided for him in the house of Chileña where Gefondo had taken him, crept between the coverlets, and sighed.

But he was not to sleep at once. His eyes were scarcely closed, when a voice called him, and, jerking to a sit-

ting posture, he saw Gefondo at the window, astride the sill.

"Young master, how went the night? Speak quickly, for it is daylight. I have had the devil's own time finding you."

Basil told of the supper and scene in the emperor's bedroom. He was too weary to do more than speak briefly. Then, careless of Gefondo and all else, his head dropped on the pillow as the hunchback was saying:

"Dreams troubled him? Ill luck for the man of herbs. But there'll be more than dreams trouble him ere he awakens."

When Basil did awaken, Gefondo was sitting at the head of his couch. His chin rested on his breast and he slept, but stirred when Trelawney moved.

"Having served you on board ship, I asked to be near 'Sir Fool' in court," he said. "Take warning, young master, and when you ask favors of a king make them modest.

"Now, I could have had this prize of Grand Pré, for I was present when Sans Souci turned his toes to the stars. But I asked nothing for keeping a still tongue, while De Banana seized that accident to set high value on his silence."

"I have known modesty to cloak deep design," suggested Basil.

Gefondo laughed, without making a sound, stretched his arms, and rose.

"It is a pity you do not understand the island tongue," he said. "For deep designs were hinted at last night at table. There is talk of appeasing those whites who still refuse to bow their knees to Christophe's yoke by adding a white queen to his harem.

"It is a way of statecraft to provide an armistice by mating their royal puppets. Christophe is afraid of interference from England."

Basil leaped from his couch, staring at Gefondo an appeal for further enlightenment. Then he yawned. He thought the hunchback was mocking and tormenting him, perhaps trying to rouse him to some impulsive deed which might serve Gefondo's purpose. He felt that the hunchback was plotting against Christophe, and that he was cleverer than any one at court. Cruelty and cunning were stamped on his features. The spaniel-brown eyes were inscrutable and betrayed few emotions.

"I did not see you at the emperor's table," Basil remarked casually.

"I was not to be seen, but I heard. I heard them argue whether to punish Frère Mathieu for speaking against what he terms the atrocities of Christophe's reign, or try to appease the growing rebellion by the course I mentioned, of making a white queen. One year ago, for less than half the boldness of this priest's speech, they had killed him at his altar.

"Straws tell which way the wind blows. Also, rats desert a sinking ship. I wager Frère Mathieu will live after the death of Christophe.

"But here is water that all Englishmen love to dabble in." Gefondo drew aside a tapestry hung in the doorway, and Basil saw a courtyard beyond, where a stone lion's head spouted a bright stream into a pool.

Flowers grew along the walls of this pool. A humming-bird sipped and splashed like a living jewel, its wings gleaming in the sunshine. Basil stripped and plunged, emerging pink-fleshed from the chill of rock-cooled pipes which brought the water from a spring hidden deep in the mountain.

Gefondo assisted him to dress in garments he had brought for Trelawney, and he was clad in tight-fitting black silk, with a cape of red and blue cut in points, and each point weighted by a bell. A jester's cap with a long drooping point had another bell.

There was a puppet on a stick in the same dress, with tiny bells. Basil's lips drew sidewise in a wry smile, and his blue eyes were troubled as he shook the bells.

"Once, on Le Diable Noir, I asked you to look at a fool, Gefondo. Look now!"

"Sometimes, young master, we are given glimpses of prophecy. Better a fool than a rogue. Better be bitten than be a biting dog. The end holds less of shame."

A tray was brought in by a servitor, and when Basil had breakfasted he followed Gefondo down the passageway and they saw De Banana waiting beside the door of the emperor's room. A group of those who had dined with him the night before were also in attendance, and each giant black lord held an article of the emperor's attire on a silver salver.

Gefondo's lips were opened wide in his silent, horrid laughter, but he stood beside them, one elbow cupped in the other palm and his fingers stroking his chin.

He was by far the most sinister looking man of that group, although his skin was white. His eyes slanted upward at the outer corners with a diabolic leer, but when the emperor's door was opened he darted ahead, to the evident rage of the other lords.

Basil followed, his bells shaking in what was to him a humiliating chime of tinkling sound. In the bedroom Christophe stood naked, a great shining black animal, marvelously built except for the accumulation of fat which spoiled his strength.

He roared a command for Basil to sing and dance, and to the tune of an English rustic dance step and the chiming bells of the jester he was clad by his lords, each presenting a garment to his valet de chambre.

Then a conclave took place, with all standing except the emperor and Basil, who was motioned to a stool at his side. To sit in the presence of royalty had been a prerogative of the Trelawney coat of arms. But now Basil sat because he was of less importance than the valet de chambre who dressed the emperor.

Nor could he understand their talk, except that it ended in dissension.

Later a procession formed to inspect the Citadel, and Basil was dismissed. He went to his room and sat in the window looking down over the Milot Valley, where flowers stretched like carpets of gorgeous color, and palms shivered, and tall spikes of yuccas stood like bayonets between plumy cashaw trees.

He saw the white villa of Plantation Grand Pré, and the road winding up the mountain deep rutted by monstrous loads that were hauled for the building of the Citadel. He saw guards pacing the wall, and soldiers posted as sentries in the courtyard, and realized the trap into which he and Violette had fallen.

Escape seemed impossible, yet he must find a way out. The news given him by Gefondo, that Christophe considered placing a white queen beside him on the throne to appease the rapidly growing menace of white survivors after the savage atrocities which washed Christophe to his power on a wave of blood.

It meant one thing, that the emperor had glutted greedy eyes on the beauty of Violette. And she was prisoner with Basil in the Citadel and in the power of a monster.

To find Violette! To hear her speak and assure him she was unharmed and well; perhaps to combine his wits with hers in some plan of escape! For an hour that wish grew and spread until Basil was hanging from the window ledge surveying the rough-hewn blocks of stone and out-jutting ornamentation, and wondering if the guards would face that hot sun and notice if he crept along the stones and found her window.

For he knew by the prettiness of his room furnishings that he was lodged in the woman's wing of the citadel, and any of those other windows might reveal the girl he loved.

He swung from the window at a

dizzy height, only to desist a moment later when he saw a creeping line of toiling humans emerge around a bend of the road below. Gazing down, he saw that they hauled a heavy log on wheels of a gun carriage, straining and shining as sweat poured from their naked skins.

And, on a short bend of the road the load stuck fast, and not all the whip-lashing of overseers, nor their shouts and cries, served to budge the load.

Basil estimated their number at thirty men, and could well understand how they had failed. But he was to see how Emperor Christophe drew superhuman service from the victims of his rule.

Still swinging from the window and clinging by one hand and foot, he saw that the emperor and his suite were on the upper parapet, and Christophe had signaled by a gesture some command to the men below. There came a shrill yelp, and every fourth man of the toiling wretches on the road stood aside.

The Citadel gates opened and a whole company of soldiers poured out. Basil waited no longer, but seizing the edges of stone blocks, made his way like a spider flattened against the wall from one block to the next on a journey so perilous that a misstep had dashed him to the stone below.

He had seen the flutter of a woman's scarf at a window ledge, and a white arm lying on the gray stone. In five long minutes of his terrific climbing he had reached that ledge, heard a cry in a woman's voice, and had drawn his body inside the frame.

"Basil—" Her voice, her sweet voice, her hand on his wrist, and in another moment she was in his arms and their lips had met. A soft sarabande of laughter trilled near by. The mad dancer was laughing happily and whirling in her airy grace about the room while Basil drank in with hungry eyes the beauty of Violette.

"You cannot stay here, Sweet."

"To-night I am to be presented at court. Go now, beloved, the empress may come, and it would be death for you."

His hands had seized the ledge to swing himself down when there came a ringing crash. Looking toward the road whence the sound exploded, he held Violette from that sight.

Of that toiling, suffering company who could not haul the tree bole up the road, every fourth man had been shot. So Christophe drove flesh and blood under the lash of fear and peril to perform his dreadful tasks.

Their black bodies, stained with gushing crimson, lay in the sun. Their companions heaved and strained at the log which slowly moved forward inch by suffering inch.

"Stay back, Violette. Don't look below," he said, and swung away, cautiously now, for the soldiers were reloading their muskets and would at any moment start back to the gates.

He had gained his own window and looked back, when an airy pink cloud sailed from Violette's window, and the Petit Feu tossed kisses from both white hands to the sky. Then fingers gripped Basil's ankle, and he was jerked into his own room, sprawling on the floor and looking his amazement at this treatment by Gefondo.

"Now, indeed, I know you wear no disguise in this cap and bells. A man who would risk his life like that to see a woman is a fool and worse. How fares the lady?"

"Well, and not aware yet of her peril," said Basil, crossing his legs as he sat on the floor.

"At the last fire of sacrifice lighted in the jungle," said Gefondo musingly, "the Silent One voiced a prophecy. I have not your gift for riming words, but if I had it would run in this wise:

> "When love and madness enter the Citadel,
> Come storm and trouble and tolling death knell.

"The Mad Dancer has been here before, young master, but it is the first

time Bonnet L'Évêque has housed a love romance worthy of the name; and I feel in my bones that the end is near."

CHAPTER XI.

VOODOO WORSHIP.

BASIL had crossed his legs under him as he sat on the floor, but his head was lifted and his eyes roved. He appeared intently observant of the heavy tapestries draping the walls, and reaching the lower edge of the nearest, examined the thick fabric, twisting it with all his strength. Gefondo watched him, his own eyes dark with the shadow of foreboding.

"You like this woman's nest they have provided for the emperor's fool," he said sneeringly.

"No better than my berth on Le Diable Noir, but this woven stuff seems strong, Gefondo, and recalls to my mind the story of Queen Dido. You've heard the tale of her?"

Gefondo shook his head and frowned.

"It is scarce a time to ponder tales of other queens than this bride-elect of Christophe."

"Queen Dido was a lady who used her wits, Gefondo, and with the hide of a bull she managed to wrest a kingdom from black overlords of such another hot land as this. Some day you shall hear the tale; perhaps in company with the emperor. Her example occurs to me as one I might emulate."

"Young master, you've a plan. Why not confide in me?"

"You've been a friend, Gefondo; I'd tell you almost anything, but as yet I have hardly a plan."

"But you saw the marquise; you spoke with her. Of what?"

"If you must know, Gefondo, we spoke of love. And I found her more beautiful than ever."

"Being young, it follows she is beautiful as is all youth. Being two young fools in peril of your lives, it follows you would waste precious moments speaking of love. But is she not awed at the honor of being a white queen to Christophe?"

"Your jest is in poor taste, Gefondo. She knows nothing of it, thank Heaven. Nor would I soil her ears by such an infamy. There is evil enough in store that she should be presented to-night at his court and look on his face.

"But, Gefondo, this heavy stuff hanging on these walls is full of dust. I have a mind to sleep in walls of bare stone. If you will let me stand on your shoulders, I'll arrange this room to suit my fancy."

"You'll maybe sleep soon enough in walls of stone, young master. Still, I think there is deep design under that whim."

When Gefondo rose, Basil leaped lightly to his shoulders, and with the hunchback stumbling under the youth's feet, he unfastened the heavy wall tapestry from hooks which held it, and that fabric of Flemish looms fell in stiff folds along the floor until the dust rose chokingly and the ornate furnishings bared walls on which beetles and spiders scuttled to nests in the top corners.

"Your knife, Gefondo," Basil demanded, and when it was handed him he sat on the floor, slitting the tapestry into long strips a foot in width. Gefondo, divining his purpose, began to roll them, tying the ends together.

"They were earnest workers who spun these yarns and wove the scenes of ancient gods' amours. And as their length equals your height with outstretched arms, added to my own height, we can compute the length of your allotted span, young master.

"Best have a care it serves not as a noose to hang you. That would be an end to his fool that would tickle the fancy of Christophe."

"I'll remember your warning, and leave you at this task, my friend, while I see how deep lies the gully where

vultures wheeled down this morning to feast on the emperor's physician."

Basil stepped to the window sill, clung there a moment, and then catching the ledge of masonry, climbed upward. Gefondo craned his neck to watch until he saw the slender black-clad figure mount the upper parapet and run along the coping, then he returned to the task of slitting and winding tapestry.

It was more than two hours later when he returned, swinging like a graceful black bat along the rough stone wall, and clinging to the window frame to swing himself inside the room. Blue shadows of the hills lay on the valley. The fierce sun heat was tempered by the evening breeze.

Gefondo, having completed his task, was gone, and the rolled strips of tapestry lay like a rolled carpet along the walls. Basil was hot and tired and stripped to plunge in the pool, when his door opened and a servant entered carrying a tray of food and drink.

"Fetch it here," he called from the pool where he sat in water to his chin, and to the grinning amusement of the servant, he ate as he soaked in the cold fountain bath. There was barely time to shave his chin and dress before the fanfare of a trumpet sounded from below, the courtyard gates clanged shut, and the night sentries were posted.

Basil knew that whoever went through those gates must have a watchword and bear the scrutiny of the guard. His heart sank. It was well enough to have provided himself with a length of stout fabric that would reach from the upper parapet to a sloping bank on that rock surmounted by the Citadel, but he knew of no way to hoist the heavy stuff to the roof coping, nor how he should take Violette there.

His plan, vague at best, to use the line for a descent and escape, seemed utterly useless; yet he knew he dared not allow the girl to spend another night under the roof of the emperor.

A glance below showed him the guards pacing up and down the outer wall. Not even in the darkness could he carry the line and toss it over to roll below.

And while he cudgeled his brains to find a use for this sacrifice of priceless weaving, he heard the tarantella of a trumpet which was the signal for that procession to the throne room, of which he must form a most unwilling and unhappy mote.

He opened the door and darted down the corridor to find the emperor had already left his suite, the hall lined with soldiers in their finest uniforms, carrying banners on spear staffs. Through the open door of the royal bedroom, Basil saw the valet de chambre scurrying to straighten the disorder.

No doubt every one in the Citadel would make merry that night. Basil wondered if ever again he would have so great an opportunity to pit his own wit against the wine-befuddled carelessness of Christophe's minions.

Then, shaking his bells and dancing, he led that pompous thunder tread of soldiers' feet which beat staid measure to the music of drums and horns sounding from the throne room.

In a long queue of color, red, blue, gold braid, jingling spurs and clanking swords, feather-bedecked hats, the lords of Haiti wound up the stair and filled the great audience hall to overflowing. Beside him on the gilded throne sat Christophe's empress in white satin and furs, a gold crown on her head. Sweat rained down the royal faces.

The lords were ranged about the walls, with their wives and retinue. Rich food and copious wine was served. Talk and laughter grew loud and louder. Light from thousands of candles in great chandeliers gleamed on the crystal prisms and flowed over silks and satins and velvets of their dresses of the brightest colors that dye vats could turn out.

The emperor's fool capered about at will, provoking gusts of uproarious mirth and earning not a few languorous glances from the younger wives.

And, like a butterfly beating fragile wings helplessly against the black entanglement of a web, the woman they called Little Fire fluttered through dances of such grace and beauty that Basil's heart ached with joy and pity of it.

She smiled at him and danced around him while he held his belled puppet like a guitar and plucked imaginary strings, singing a dance song for her steps. Then, when she came close, he found a chance to whisper:

"Lady, will you help a fool—then tell her who is of your own pale fairness and white race to delay her coming on some pretext or other until I manage to have a word at her door."

She laughed in silver tones and danced down the hall. Basil watched covertly until she disappeared, then ran to the musicians and made fun of their tunes.

"Is this the best you can do, Sir Leader, to stir the blood of these lords. Faith, I could teach you your own trade. The night is all too stale. Faster, louder, merrier, I pray you."

The antics of the musicians' leader resembled those of a clown, but he grinned good-naturedly at Basil, not understanding his talk. The music continued at a stately march tempo, and the reason of it was apparent when, led by Petit Feu, came the Marquis de Tourraine with Violette leaning on his arm.

Basil's heart seemed to pause, then race, as their eyes met, and he read in her glance both fear and love. She advanced to the throne, inclined her fair head, then moved toward chairs that had remained unoccupied. Sitting there, she was white and still.

The marquis, whose mind seemed to Basil to have returned to childhood, either did not notice or refused to admit the menace of the situation. He spoke to drunken black lords at each side, and replied to the emperor.

An old courtier himself, he seemed to enjoy this return to royal prodigality, although as the evening went on and the fun grew more boisterous, he resented the familiarity of manner shown him.

The hours dragged endlessly. Basil tried to keep near Violette, but Little Fire, who danced in and out of the hall, circled him and kept him serving as a sort of maypole about which she whirled and tossed her flame-colored draperies, then presently caught his hand, and with him danced toward the end.

"A more comical fool than you makes fun alone to-night," she said. "I saw him gaping and tongueless, and rolling a great ball through the shadows. Come and see, my fool."

Basil looked toward the throne, where Christophe, sated with wine, sulked moodily. Then he darted toward the door and caught his breath, for coming down that corridor was Gefondo, a whip-lash in his hand, and he snapped it over the bent, naked back of a man who laboriously rolled a huge ball that Basil recognized as the strips of tapestry he had cut that afternoon.

The few loungers looked on or merely glanced and paid little attention. Some laughed as the man who shoved the ball winced at the whiplash, but Basil's faith in the hunchback toppled about his ears. He saw Gefondo as a traitor who brought evidence of his plan to escape to Christophe.

Knowing that the life of Violette, honor that was more than life, hung in the balance, he darted down and caught the lash from Gefondo.

"Fiend," he snarled, "how could you so far-forget your color and race—I meant only to help—her."

And Gefondo, with teeth set and his lips drawn in an animal rage, leaped at Basil, and both twisted and struggled for mastery while the other man shoved the great ball near a door that

was ajar, pushed it inside the room and fled.

"Well done, young master," breathed Gefondo in Basil's ear; "now best go dance and play the fool. The life line is in the emperor's bedroom. No doubt he'll dangle you at its end down the trap by which men's souls escape at his command."

And with a mighty heave of his arms he sent Basil spinning toward the audience hall, his brain whirling with his body. For in a flash he saw the plan of Gefondo. He could not use the rope he had contrived from a window or the parapet, but the death slide led from Christophe's chamber to the hillside.

When he glanced back, Gefondo was not in sight. The drums, which were only tom-toms of the African forest, beat out a wilder measure, a blood-lashing tempo. Music rose in barbaric storm. The mad dancer whirled until her red and gold draperies were flames flying down the hall.

Unable to resist the maddening pulsations of the tom-toms, the black lords caught women by their waists and twirled them in strange steps of a jungle dance brought from the dark forests of the Gold Coast by slave ship a generation before. The hall was a maze of rushing savages, leaving only the royal puppets on their throne, and Violette and her father in their chairs.

Basil, whose rôle was to dance, was threading that maze to be near the girl. He saw how terrified she was, and how she stared at the throne from which Christophe staggered and swayed, then made his way toward her as Violette rose and moved behind her own chair.

Seeing the peril when she should refuse to dance with the wine-befuddled emperor, Basil slipped behind the tapestries which hung from the ceiling, and moved along the wall until he came to where Violette pressed the fabric flat.

His knife slit an aperture, and at the sound she turned. Basil had caught her hand, drawn her through and pulled her with him behind the hangings toward the door.

There he looked through an opening between panels and saw the Mad Dancer circling Christophe, whirling her scarf about his head, and he fought it with both hands and yelled his displeasure, at which Little Fire laughed gayly.

There was no choice now for Basil. He drew the half-fainting Violette down the hall, reached the door, and clutching her arm, ran with her. The door of Christophe's suite was ajar. He shut it after them, and shot the great door-bolt home.

Then Basil found that tapestry which hid the Death Slide.

"To stay to-night, my dear, my very dear, would be death and more than death. You trust me, Violette?"

"I do! I must!" she cried. "Oh, Basil, I am so afraid. To-day the empress came and told me that if the emperor so much as smiled at me to-night, she would poison all I ate and drank. God knows how much I fear his smile or frown. I'd rather death, even poison, than his smile."

"Violette, we must escape, and there is but one way. It leads, I think, to the jungles. It may lead to heaven." He had drawn her near the open doorway of the slide and caught her in his arms.

In another moment they sat on the ledge and he was testing the knot of cloth which Gefondo had looped to a wall bolt. Then, without giving her time to dread the perilous drop, he wrapped an arm and leg about the rope and, with Violette clinging to his neck, lowered himself yard by yard.

The slide, an aperture about four feet square, contained their slender bodies, and gave him an opportunity to brace his knees and elbows against its sides, but it seemed endless and, light as she was, Violette's weight dragged on his strength.

He knew the slide was but the least

of those perils they must pass, and when his feet finally swung free, he held her close in one arm, and slid as he had swarmed down a rope on shipboard. But never was he weighted as now with a woman's life and his own love.

And under the stars he had glimpses of the sheer straight walls of rock against which they scraped and bumped, and tree tops waving below. He knew from viewing this hill from the parapet that day, what horrors lay below—the bodies of Christophe's victims which fed vultures.

Then suddenly Violette's arms were limp on his shoulders. She had fainted, and he carried a more desperate burden than before. It seemed as if his own arms must part from their sockets. His flesh was burned by the rub of the coarse cloth rope when tree branches caught and tangled him, and still were not strong enough to hold his weight while he rested.

Slithering and scraping he fought deeper into the thicket, and at length touched ground, on which he dropped with the girl, and lay panting and exhausted.

But not for more than time to fill his lungs. That thick, moist foliage held fer-de-lance, whose sting was death. It held horror. For a moment he repented leaving the uncertain mercy of Christophe for more certain death.

It seemed to Basil Trelawney that his knife should end the life of Violette and drink deep of his own heart's blood as the only way out of their perils. Then the courage of youth, the love of life and her, prompted him to try again, to fight again.

Lying there, rubbing her wrists, calling her back from unconsciousness, he caught amid the fragrant breaths from jungle flowers a smell of wood smoke, and the familiar scent was like a reveille. Where there was smoke, was fire. It would serve as a guide to human habitation.

He caught Violette on his shoulder and staggered on perhaps five hundred yards, and found a clearly defined trail, where he set her on her feet and caught one arm about her, and together they went forward until he had a glimpse of winking light.

"A little further, Sweet, and we'll find help," he had said, and repented his rash promise. For when they came within sight of the flames, there were dark, nude dancers circling, hideously painted black bodies, necklaces of fresh-cut cock's combs dripping blood upon their chests, and in the fire something that made Basil shudder, and which sent its awful stench to heaven.

And there, dancing with the others, naked to the waist, was Gefondo. There was little noise except the crackling of the flames for several minutes. Then, from overhead came a squawk and a cock, dismembered of claws and comb, was tossed down, at which a shout arose as it floundered in dying agony about the fire, then flopped into the embers, heaved, and lay still.

Basil pressed Violette's face against his breast so that she could not see the horror. But he himself watched Gefondo break from the circling dancers and, kneeling before the flames, warm his hands.

The hunchback molded something black and soft between his fingers that was swiftly shaped into the crude likeness of a human body. He held it aloft, and the crowd pressed close and sent up a shout like a burst of thunder in which Basil distinguished the name of "Christophe."

Gefondo held the little image high, muttering phrases as the howling grew wilder, then he plunged it feet first into the hot coals and drew it out shapeless.

Tom-toms beat, near at hand, farther away, a continuous rippling murmur that seemed to fill the gloom about them. They purred and quickened, and there began a dance about the fire with Gefondo inside the circle shout-

ing vociferous rantings which in the excitement of the hunchback were often French phrases that Basil could interpret.

"Christophe has betrayed you. Christophe takes a white queen. Christophe plays a traitor's part. He grows fat and weak of will, and fond of his wine and women. It is time, oh, brothers, another king ruled in the Citadel.

"To-night, Christophe lifts the white-faced French woman to his throne and puts away his Bread-and-Butter.

"Here, in the fire burns the man of Haiti whom Christophe killed. Here burns our brother in blood. Vengeance calls from the fire. Blood cries from the ground. Shall it cry and call in vain?"

A shout answered him.

"Bring jungle wine, my brothers. Pour wine and blood as Christophe has poured them. Spit on his image as he would spit on his vows. The blood of our brother wails through the forest. The emperor has taken his enemies into the Citadel. A French queen will rule Haiti, and the black man shall wear chains if we forget the blood spilled when our brother died last night."

Half of the dancers darted into the gloom beyond, and returned carrying gourds. Basil saw the beginning of an orgy whose horrors he could not imagine, for above the din he heard screams in a human voice, wild shouting, and then a cessation of the terror-stricken cry. He fought the thought which came unbidden. He was helpless to prevent what happened at that fire in the woods where Voodoo lifted its scaled and hideously fanged head.

He caught Violette in his arms and retraced his way on the path to where it branched off. There was no danger of their being seen by the absorbed devotees of that dread rite, but he faced the fact that he was lost in the Haitian jungle at night, with Violette dependent on him. He said no word to her, but forged on and on, and she surprised him by her endurance.

Insects droned and clacked and hummed. There were strange rustlings and movements in the thickets, but the path was clearly defined and, by the glimpses he had of Bonnet L'Évêque, he knew they traveled away from it and toward the highway he had seen like a gray ribbon under the hot sun of afternoon.

That highway would lead to Cap François one way, and Limonade the other. When it was reached, he must decide which direction to take.

Then when it seemed as if the jungle was less dense and the stars showing thicker between the scarcer branches overhead, came a sound so close and startling that Basil's arms caught Violette, and she sobbed in sudden hysteria on his breast.

"Mon Dieu, it is the end—death!" she cried.

His knife was in his hand. They dared not go back. They faced an unknown possibility. He was conscious of only one thought, that if the intervening bushes screened the horror he imagined, he would strike swiftly. Violette must not leave his arms for that Voodoo fire. Death was heaven for her compared to that hell.

CHAPTER XII.

WHERE GHOSTS DANCE.

VIOLETTE did not realize it, but the point of Basil's knife lay along her side. One quick upward thrust and her young heart would be stilled forever. His arm still held her while they waited.

There had come no second raucous noise startling in the night stillness. The tensity of his fear was almost breaking his control into a wild shriek of hysteric laughter, for the sound which so frightened both was the stentorian bray of a donkey.

But it was the rider whom they feared, until when the last gasp of its neigh was silent, Basil heard a voice speaking English.

"Is that a way to serve our Lord, Céleste? Now, we must turn about, and I had hoped to see what mischief brewed at the jungle fire to-night. Oh, foolish beast!"

Basil moved cautiously, and as cautiously parted the branches, then he leaped forward, taking Violette with him. Under the stars, somewhat in the jungle shadow, he made out the robe of a priest.

"Father," he cried, "do not be alarmed. Here are two people in distress, come from the vicinity of the jungle fire."

He parted the bushes and faced the priest, who exclaimed in amazement at the sight of a woman, young, slender, her fine frock torn and stained, clinging to the arm of a man in jester's dress.

"La Marquise Violette de Tourraine!" announced Basil, "and an Englishman, Basil Trelawney, both escaped prisoners from the Citadel."

"My lady, I had heard of your arrival and greatly feared for you," said the priest. "It is well to escape evil; but difficult to escape Christophe. Where are you going now?"

"We have no place," said Basil. He spoke quickly, relating the events of the night. "And you, father, could you shelter her? For me, it does not matter. I shall return to the Citadel."

"I have a church at Limonade," said the priest.

"Then you are Father Mathieu, whose brave denunciation has enraged the emperor. Father, he threatens vengeance on you."

"It will not be the first time. And I am glad to offer the lady sanctuary at the convent of Limonade, but God in His wisdom alone knows if Christophe shall be allowed to search for her.

"You have little time to waste if you'd return to Bonnet L'Évêque, young sir. Here, place the lady on my steed. There is little danger on this road to-night, for all that have not gone to make merry at the Citadel are imbibing evil in the jungles, except my little flock at Limonade."

Basil swung Violette to the donkey's back, but she clung to him.

"Don't leave me now, Basil—I cannot endure another parting," she sobbed.

"Sweet, there is the marquis, still at the Citadel; an old man and in the power of an emperor, who will resent your flight. I must go back for his sake."

"My brave—and I so selfish I had not thought of his being in danger. Oh, Basil, when shall we meet again?"

"In a few hours, my very dear. If Christophe is drunk enough and I can manage, I'll fetch him down the slide as we two came, and join you at Limonade. Be brave, dear heart."

He kissed her eyelids and throat and tasted the salt of her tears; then, watching the donkey trot down the road and the long legs of the priest swinging his robe as he kept pace, Basil turned back on the path.

How to enter the Citadel he did not know, but that was a difficulty he would decide when it was closer. The jungle trail led again toward the fire, and hearing less noisy sounds of hideous revelry, he went close and peered through the thickets.

The gourds had held most potent drink, for most of the dancers lay sodden about the fire like a strange harvest of death. Gefondo sat cross-legged on a log, the twisted figure he had made and marred between his fingers, like a solemn brooding fate.

Then as Basil watched he stepped from the log, and with a sneer twisting his lips stepped over the sleeping black men and took the jungle trail. Basil waited until he was close, then whispered his name: "Gefondo!"

"Who calls?" came the reply like a hissed breath.

"The fool." A scrap of sardonic

laughter told Basil that the hunchback knew, and a moment later he stepped into the path. "Thanks for fastening that rope, Gefondo."

"You made use of it, young master?"

"She is with Father Mathieu at Limonade. Now I must return for the marquis."

"At Limonade. You trust me better than this afternoon, fool."

"Gefondo, when a man's heart lies in a woman's hands, he trusts only himself. Now, I ask that you tell me a way to return."

"If you knew Christophe and his court as I know it, you would go back the way you came. They'll drink all night and sleep all day. But why return? Why put your head in the lion's jaws a second time?"

"The marquis is an old man and innocent. They'd kill him perhaps."

"When Christophe is sober, he'll torture him. Well, go back. 'Tis proof that thy bells and fool's cap are deserved. But I shall not return. I go to Sans Souci to free that great giant, Jack Butts, who is reserved for Voodoo fires."

"Gefondo, an hour ago I watched your fire, and saw—"

"Young master, whisper not a word, or you may feel instead of see those fires. Go quickly now. Dawn is not far away."

He went with Basil, so quickly that it was all he could do to follow, until they came to the rope dangling down the cliff sides

"When you have done with it, cut it loose. Christophe's men never visit this place for fear of ghosts. But the Jungle Brethren take care of the dead who fall from an emperor's grace. You saw the cremation of the emperor's physician to-night."

Already the sky was lighter gray between the stars, and Basil caught the dangling rope and began that long ascent, crawling like a fly against the wall, hand over hand, legs gripping the fabric between his knees until he entered the opening in the stone, and could rest at times, body braced across the hole.

After a time his hands gripped the upper ledge and he drew his body across it; he lay and listened, and heard no sound from the emperor's bedroom.

Drawing his feet slowly up, he tested them on the floor, moved behind the hangings until he came to the end of a panel and peered out.

On the magnificent bed, Christophe was sprawled, a limp giant in pink silk nightgown, deep in drink sodden sleep, his black toes standing upright. On a couch lay his valet, as deeply asleep.

Basil waited breathlessly, then tried the edge of his knife on the dangling rope by which he had left and returned to the Citadel. Soundlessly he severed it and let it drop. There was a scraping as of mice as it fell.

He carefully unknotted the free end still twisted about the bolt and dropped it also. But to don the jester's cape with its bells and not awaken the emperor was a more formidable task. For some time he remained behind the curtain, uncertain whether to dare venture into that room and sit beside the bed as if he had sung Christophe to sleep as on the preceding night, or to leave his cape and work his way behind the curtains, then make a dash for the door.

He was saved a decision by a peal of soft-voiced merry laughter which startled him. A woman's voice rippled a sarabande of mirth, then moaned softly.

Peering out he saw a white-robed figure with a death mask face staring pallidly horrible from the folds of white cloth. And it moaned again and whirled slowly, then darted to the bed and laid a slender hand on the face of Christophe.

The black eyes of the emperor opened, dilated with horror, then his shriek roused the sleeping valet.

"Sans Souci—take him away. Get

back to your hell, you demon—Sans Souci!" Shriek after shriek of terror rang through the room. From the outer chamber the guards ran in, then stood as if spellbound while the sheeted figure whirled and swooped, and clawed the air, and the emperor covered himself under the lace coverlet he had snatched, and buried his face in its folds, groaning in terror, then screaming to his guards.

Their dark faces were gray. Alone and hidden among them, Basil had recognized the pretty, pink-nailed hands of Little Fire, but he could not guess what whim had set her to this prank of frightening Christophe.

She held them all in a spell of terror while she danced. She moaned, and the moans ended in a wild burst of silver laughter. Quite evidently the mad dancer enjoyed the consternation she was causing.

Then she suddenly whipped aside the sheet and shook her mask in his face.

At once the guards leaped, but Christophe had recovered his courage.

"You dogs, you curs, you—" he called them names of unutterable indecency—"to let a woman frighten you. Come here, Little Fire. Tell your emperor who told you to waken me by a ghost dance and provided you the death mask of Sans Souci?"

"I frighten you? It was a merry dance. My Lord De Banana said it would prove so. I shall show it to the empress and tell her how her emperor hid his face from so small a woman as me!"

"De Banana! De Banana told you and gave you the death mask of Sans Souci. We'll find this De Banana, and think of ways to show how we appreciate his jesting.

"Take away this Little Fire. I'd as soon touch a fer-de-lance; but mind you treat her gently. 'Tis said the gods protect those whose wits have fled, and I have trouble in plenty now. Take her to my empress, and fetch this De Banana, quickly."

Christophe broke into oaths whose violence grew with his rage. Foam gathered at his lips, and his frenzy was madder than the dance of Little Fire. He caught up a chair and crashed it against the wall; snatched at another and, whirling it like a club, heaved it at his guards.

They crowded the door making their escape, and the room was empty of all but the frightened valet de chambre, for Basil had seized that opportunity to escape with the crowd who cared not a whit about the jester.

He went to his own room, where, to his amazement, he saw Gefondo seated in his window, arms wound about his knees, chin on his breast, asleep.

"A precarious perch, Gefondo," he said gently, so not to startle the hunchback. Gefondo opened his eyes, dropped his feet, and stepped inside, then yawned prodigiously. "How did you reach this room so quickly. I thought you'd be at Sans Souci."

"I have ways and means, young master, to travel quickly. But tell me how you fared, and what is this sound of screams that disturbed my own slumber?"

Basil told him of the scene in the emperor's bedroom, and Gefondo grinned his silent, horrid laughter.

"I knew he'd have more dreams," he said, and was again convulsed with soundless mirth. Weary to death, Basil dropped on the bed and unfastened his shoes, and dropped the belled cape he had carried, on the floor.

"Tell me," he said thoughtfully, "what has Christophe done, that not one who eats his bread, is loyal?"

"Well, young master, I wear this twisted spine because of his abuse." Gefondo's voice was low and smooth-flowing, like the purr of a great cat. "My name was De Tourraine. His black men stole me as a small child, and I served Christophe like a dog without receiving the kind treatment which some dogs get."

"De Tourraine? A kinsman of the marquis and Violette?"

"Their kinsman. Grand Pré was my birthplace and would have been mine had I not been stolen—and broken. I escaped death. But what has life been to me? It is just, young master, that a De Tourraine should be the means of vengeance on Christophe."

"I thought that honor, if it be honor, would fall on De Banana tonight," said Basil. "When I left, the emperor seemed as if seized by a fit, he had been so terrified and was afterward so enraged."

"De Banana, being in danger of losing both bride and Grand Pré thought a fright might compel Christophe to carry out his promise, so he persuaded the Mad Dancer to the task of playing ghost.

"The Little Fire is light on her feet as thistle-down. I wish I had seen that dance. Swathed in white, with the death mask of Sans Souci, she must have frightened him." Gefondo smacked his lips as if he tasted a wine of rare bouquet, and again grinned.

"Well, young master, it promises to be a busy day for all."

"What of your kinsman, the marquis?" asked Basil.

"I had news, but it is sad. When his daughter disappeared last night he swore she had been stolen by the emperor's connivance, and his grief was too great a trial at his age. He was suddenly stricken. Fortunately, he will die."

"How pitiful. Where is he? I'll go and see him and assure him that—"

Gefondo made a gesture to command silence.

"Assure him that these walls have ears, young master. His death will leave me heir of Grand Pré, now that De Banana has turned fool and is like to drive you from your position at court.

"It is passing strange, but as I called to see the marquis not a half hour ago, his wandering mind mistook me for his cousin, and he spoke as if we had just met on the quay. He was happy over his welcome.

"I left him because of this turmoil in the royal bedchamber, and thought I would sleep a moment."

"You never seem to rest, Gefondo."

"On board Le Diable Noir you heard that on this island sleep was dangerous, and closed eyes an invitation to death. It is true."

"This land looks so beautiful," commented Basil, "but surely it is hell."

"Men's greed and passions have made it hell. Once, they say, it was like paradise. I was born too late to remember anything but a dream of dusk and stars and a woman who crooned lullabies as my head lay on her breast. They stole me from her arms."

The lips of Gefondo snarled like an animal's. "They took me to the jungle and I became one of the brotherhood, a thing like leprosy in my life, which ostracizes a man from his people for all time. I, who am a De Tourraine!"

The acrid bitterness of his voice, the hatred shining in his eyes made a demoniac mask of his face. He leaped at the window frame, catching stones and cornices, swung out, and like a spider scuttled at an incredible speed which showed long practice, to the courtyard below.

Sun gold gilded the pearl gray light of dawn flowing over Milot Valley. Basil dropped back on the pillow and closed his eyes. Thoughts tormented him like stinging insects he could not brush aside.

He should never have returned to the Citadel. It was impossible now to save the bed-ridden and dying marquis whose release was in the hands of a higher king than Christophe. How, since he was again prisoner, could he escape again and find Violette?

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

The Origin of Wrestling

By W. O. McGEEHAN

A fanciful account by the well-known sports writer of how the modern grappling bout got its start

THE charge of being responsible for the origin of wrestling has been made against many countries, but it seems after sifting the evidence that the ancient Greeks are guilty as charged, with the Romans accomplices before and after the fact. It has been proved that the first wrestling is still known as Græco-Roman wrestling. While the Greeks are perfectly willing to admit that they established the first chop houses they are a bit sensitive about being charged with wrestling.

The sport originated in quite an accidental fashion at Athens. Sappo, a young Greek said to be distantly related to the poetess Sappho, was rolling a barrel of Samian wine up the hill to the Acropolis. Sappo, being a chubby young fellow, had considerable difficulty in propelling the cask. As he neared the top his foot slipped and the barrel and the Greek rolled down the hill together.

Sappo having been trained in Sparta where the youth were taught never to let go of anything, especially a coin, clung convulsively to the cask as it rolled down the hill. It happened that Themistocles and Aristides, two prominent sports of Athens, saw this episode.

"I'll bet ten drachma that the cask is on top of Sappo when they hit the bottom," said Themistocles.

"I'll take you," said Aristides quickly, and they stopped to watch the cask and the Greek as they struggled down the incline. They reached the bottom and the struggle ceased.

"Pay me," said Themistocles. "The cask wins."

"No, no," said Aristides. "That is the Greek Sappo who is on top."

They proceeded to the foot of the hill and found that the match was a draw and that neither man nor cask had landed on top.

Pondering over this strange occurrence Themistocles asked of Sappo: "Is there by any chance a man in Athens who is as round as you and whose

forehead is so low and whose neck is quite as short?"

Instantly Sappo replied: "There is Achmides, the Corinthian, who is without forehead or neck at all and who is shaped so like a cask that coopers constantly are putting hoops around him by mistake."

"Go then," said Themistocles. "Bring hither Achmides, the Corinthian, for the goddess Pallas Athene has hit me between the eyes with an idea for a new sport."

When Achmides arrived Themistocles said to the barrel-shaped men: "Now each of you will endeavor to put the other on his back. To the winner I will give one talent in gold. Begin."

Whereupon Sappo and Achmides began to wrestle. According to the Greek calendar the bout lasted for ten days, the men being equally matched.

The populace of Athens came to the Acropolis to witness the sport and most of them brought their bedding and rations for a week. All other municipal activities were suspended as the people of Athens cheered on the gladiators.

On the afternoon of the tenth day the bout ended abruptly. It seems that Achmides, overcome by a desire to sleep, rolled over on his back and began to snore lustily.

Hearing the first snore the clever Sappo claimed a victory. There was quite a protest when Themistocles awarded the decision to him, as it was seen that sleep and not the power of Sappo had overcome the Corinthian. But there was no appeal from the decision of Themistocles, who had the reputation of being one of the squarest sports in old Athens.

Of course, the men were rematched a few weeks later, and the crowd that assembled at the Acropolis packed the inclosure. This time Achmides had been doing some thinking despite the fact that his narrow forehead gave him very little material to think with.

As he passed through a street where the ascent to the Acropolis began, Achmides walked through a little group of Athenian children at play. They were chanting the very ancient children's rime which has been traced back to the time of the Pharaohs. It ran:

> "Eeney, meeney, miney mo,
> Catch a bimbo by the toe,
> If he hollers, let him go.
> Eeney, meeney, miney mo."

Instantly a complete thought percolated the thick, hard skull of Achmides. The ancients, of course, maintain that the thought was put into his head by Pallas Athene herself, the goddess of thought. This superstition, naturally cannot be considered at all as even a lady possessed of supernatural powers could not make a thought enter the head of a wrestler even by using a gimlet.

However the thought got there, the fact remains that it did arrive. Of course, this historian maintains that it got there by purely natural means, perhaps spontaneous combustion, or it may have sprung into being through the fumes of Samian wine.

Once again Achmides faced Sappo on the mat at the Acropolis. This time the Athenian, naturally was a heavy favorite over the Corinthian. The bout had gone only two days when Achmides suddenly seized the big toe of Sappo's right foot and began to twist it. Sappo complained to the referee, but got little or no sympathy.

By this time Achmides had completely forgotten the second couplet of the verse which said, "if he hollers let him go." Instead of letting go, Achmides not only retained his toe-hold, but began to grip it with greater firmness and Sappo's moans could be heard by the sailors far out on the Ægean Sea.

After a little more of this Sappo held up one hand as a signal that he had enough. Achmides was pulled from his victim by four husky helots—slaves—and Sappo rose to his feet limping.

"Are you not going to wrestle any

more, oh, Sappo?" asked Themistocles.

"Yes," replied Sappo. "But not this afternoon. I have an appointment with my chiropodist."

Anybody who recalls his Greek knows that a chiropodist was then as he is now a corn doctor. The word comes from the words chiro, meaning corn and podist meaning a plasterer. In other words it means one who plasters corns.

With the development of the toe-hold other wrestlers started to compete, but very few of them were equal to the task of throwing Achmides while that gladiator could remain awake. Finally there came a Persian whom they called the "Strangler." He threw a great many of the mediocre Greek wrestlers with a new hold.

His method was to clamp their skulls between his elbow joints and exert pressure upon them until their brains were compressed into segments even smaller than normal.

Eventually the Strangler got a match with Achmides and tried his famous hold on the round and solid head of the Spartan. He held Achmides's skull for hours at a time, but the Spartan did not even seem to be annoyed. The Strangler clamped the durable spheroid exerting all his power, but it availed nothing.

The Strangler finally succumbed to the deadly toe-hold and went back to his own country. Before departing he said: "It is no avail to work upon the heads of the Corinthians because their skulls are practically solid and whatever particles of brains they may have are so protected by this bony armor that no pressure can affect them."

The sport had a great vogue in Athens until the Phœnicians got to it. The Phœnicians were the business men of the day with factories at Tyre and traveling salesmen all over Europe. The charge has been made that they even framed the ancient Olympic games.

Finally Achmides, after a match that had lasted only five days, rolled over on his back and was beaten by a young Athenian. The populace was amazed as Achmides was a heavy favorite that day.

Themistocles who had brought some marked decks from a firm at Tyre suspected something and had Achmides shadowed to a wine shop.

There Achmides was seen in company with a Phœnician who was caught in the act of slipping the wrestler six talents of gold. The guilty wrestler was brought before Themistocles and confessed that he and the Athenian had talked it over while they were on the mat and that he finally agreed to take the flop.

Whereupon wrestling was forbidden in Athens. In stopping the sport Themistocles said: "Now that the business men from Tyre are interested in the game it is time to stop it. In a wrestling bout the men are so close together that they can whisper into each other's ears and even the referee cannot hear them."

Professor Pretzelbender of Heidelberg in his work, "The Biology of the Bonehead," attempts to prove that the Swedes were the originators of wrestling, and cites the Full Nelson and Half Nelson holds to back this theory. Of course, the Swedes did take up wrestling at a later date, but the Greeks were known to have wrestling bouts even before they had chop houses.

Modern wrestling has become systematized through the Phœnician influence. It has been arranged that each wrestler is allowed to hold the championship for a certain length of time in his proper turn.

This admirable arrangement prevents any hard feeling or bitterness in the bouts. Through this arrangement the bouts can be finished when the customers are ready to go. Also it prevents a bout being completed before the house has been counted.

THE END

Gold

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "The Cañon of Light," "Night Hawk's Gold," etc.

When a good little girl was caught in the gold rush, it took quick, red-blooded men of action to fight her battles

CHAPTER XXV.

"WE'LL BE RIDIN' IN CARRIAGES."

IN the steerage, Tom Brass was at a porthole anxiously watching the stretch of moonlit water between the ship and the Union Street wharf. The negro cook was lighting a pipe at the skillet of coals.

The skipper, totally oblivious of his own plight, was wringing his manacled hands, pacing up and down the deck between the tier of bunks and the cook who guarded the doorway.

Swope prowled in.

Brass turned around, as if some expected enemy had sneaked into the cabin.

"Look here, Swope!" he burst out. "We got to get out of this. Where's the gold? You ain't got it from her. Then what 're we goin' to do? We'll all hang if we fool away the night like this—"

"We're goin' to find out where the gold is right now," Swope said calmly. "So stow your gaff and watch me."

"Here's the coals ready, suh," the negro said. "All set, suh. Right here."

The old skipper did not bat an eye. It was quite obvious that he could not be scared by any threats of harm upon his own miserable carcass. He was beyond pain of that simple sort.

The sight of the coals on the other hand made Brass's red-whiskered face blanch. The negro's hands were trembling. Both men were much more excited than the victim.

If Swope had intended to torture the prisoner, he would have been excited, too—possibly frightened. But he intended no such thing.

"This lubber don't know where the

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gold is," he said calmly. "It's my opinion he don't even know that there is any gold. Think he'd of allowed his daughter to go ashore and sing in a bar? Not this Bible-thumpin' old loon. We were crazy thinkin' that. She did it on the sly. He didn't even know she was ashore."

The negro and Brass could not find a flaw in this conjecture. Their master as usual was slyer than they.

"Then it's the girl," Brass said. "Why didn't you get it out of her? We're wastin' precious time!"

"Now wait. All the time in the world. She'll tell. But first I want to bear down on this lubber." He faced the squat, grizzled little fighter. The other two men could not help wondering what might have happened to the slim, stoop-shouldered mate if his master had not been handcuffed.

"I'm goin' to leave it up to you, Bartlett," Swope said. "Tell that little skit in there to give up her gold. Otherwise we search the ship and get it anyway. But first you get heaved by the board. And when you're drownin' you can picture us sailin' out to sea, with your daughter on board. She'll do some singin' for us—eh, Slushy?"

Slushy laughed a slobbering, thick-lipped laugh. "Yas, suh, I dare say, suh! She'll officiate at the singin', I dare say, suh!"

The big black was standing at Swope's elbow, directly in front of Bartlett. He still held the skillet in front of him as if serving the two ship's officers a breakfast from the galley. As he threw his head up in that loud guffaw, Bartlett let fly a powerful kick, his boot catching the skillet like a football.

The skillet and its contents shot up out of the black's hands, and a shower of live coals spurted upward.

They caught him on the chin like an uppercut; they spattered against his shoulder, spilled against the bulkhead, and fell scattering over the deck.

The negro staggered back, howling. Brass sprang for the old skipper's arms, shoved him into a chair, while Swope stood aloof, chuckling at the scene.

When Bartlett had recovered his breath he began to babble in a frenzy, pleading, begging, praying to God, his voice raised until it seemed as if both he and the negro were trying to shout each other down.

"Don't touch him now, Slushy, don't go any closer," Swope warned the cook. "It's what you deserve." He stepped in front of the giant black whose only one desire in his fury was to thrash the little skipper to a pulp.

"Beg her to tell!" the skipper was crying. "Say that I'm beggin' her to tell! I'm beggin' her to give you every cent she has, every grain of dust. It's a thing of the devil—I never want her to touch gold again! Beg her to give it up—for her father's sake!

"Take it all, and get out. But don't lay a finger on my little kid if you don't want to rot in hell! Take everything, the last boat, everything on board. Take me; but leave my poor little kid!"

Swope had accomplished his purpose. It was very simple. It was much simpler than resorting to the old-fashioned bull-headed method of torture.

He knew perfectly well that a part of that scene could be heard in the next cabin. There was only the wooden bulkhead between them. Just what the girl had imagined when she heard that howling and then the frantic plea of her father, Swope could not tell. Quite likely she thought her father was being given a taste of those coals.

Yells of pain, men shouting, then the voice of her father begging that they take her gold, that was enough to bring her to terms.

It had an effect beyond Swope's anticipation. He went to the girl's cabin, unlocked the door, and she fell forward to her knees before him.

"Don't hurt him! Don't." she gasped. "It's over there—in that hogs-

head. Take it, but don't hurt my poor dear father! Take it—and go. We won't stop you. We'll never raise a finger to harm you. We forgive you everything!

"Take it all—take me! I'll go with you, anywhere. I'll sing in the camps and make more, only I beg you spare that poor helpless old man!"

Swope heard only a part of her gasps. He was already at the cask. Tom Brass, having dashed a pail of water on the coals, followed hard on his heels. Even the negro, forgetting for a moment the blisters on his chin and throat, leaped toward the cask like a hungry beast. They were like the sharks that dart after chunks of blubber when a dead whale is brought alongside.

It was one of the ordinary ten-barrel casks in which provisions were stowed on the outward-bound journey, and oil on the return home, God willing. In this case the cask was empty. But old Joshua had coopered it down. Feverishly the three men knocked off the top.

The negro held a lantern aloft. Brass peered in, the light shining up on the ghastly mask and popping red eyes. Swope, whose caste as a ship's officer always kept him aloof while the others did the work, was now at one with his henchmen. They were not so much like sharks. Three rats at a refuse barrel is a more appropriate figure of speech.

Swope reached down with both hands, bringing up a carpet bag, and groaning with the weight of it. Brass with his longer reach was able to scoop up some of the rawhide bags.

They spilled the stuff out on deck, emptying the contents of all the bags and kneeling down with the flame of the oil lamp lighting their frenzied eyes. A dull yellow glow beat up into their hot faces.

For a moment they stared, eyes bulging, lips parted in amazement. The negro's powerful snow-white teeth were the color of brass, his eyes yellow flames. The cooperer was feeling the stuff cautiously as if it might burn his fingers.

Swope, the most eager of the three, darted up and his head and shoulders disappeared again into the darkness of the big barrel.

He emerged with his hands full of leather purses, rawhide bags, buzzard quills. These he cast down to the deck before the two forecastle rats.

"Hold the lantern. There's more! A fortune!"

When they had cleaned the barrel out the treasure lay on the deck like a camp fire heaped with ashes and smoldering coals. It seemed as if the dull yellow light between decks, casting the hulking shadows of the three men had come from that one source—the pile of gold.

"The girl—where is she?" Brass asked suddenly.

"Aft there with the old lubber," said the black.

"She'll be up to tricks, Swope," Brass said hoarsely. "They won't let this stuff go easy."

"Bring her here," Swope said without looking up. He was trying to estimate how much wealth that pile represented. It would have to be divided. Brass and the black would want a good slice. And there was the angel-faced doughboy up above. Well, he could take what was left.

Still the treasure would have to be split up. And this, Swope reflected, was unbearable. It was a huge sum—huge enough to get the lust for gold coursing through his veins. For the moment he had completely forgotten the girl. She could have fled ashore for all he would have remembered. Luckily he had that nerve-stricken skeleton, Tom Brass, with him.

The two henchmen came back bringing the girl and the skipper into the circle of light.

"What did you do to get this swag?" he asked, thrusting his pinched face upward.

"She sang hymns," Brass said impa-

tiently. "But what's the odds. We've got it—ain't we?"

"Yes, but it ain't enough," Swope said.

The negro and Brass swore in surprise. "B' George, Mistah Swope, we'll be ridin' in carriages the rest of our days. Let's us get going' f'um here and do some jubilatin'."

"Finish this old duffer first, Swope, I'm warnin' you," Brass said. "Then we can get to our boat and make for the wilderness."

"Finish him?" Swope repeated. "Why do that? It was him that got us this, wasn't it?"

They stared. Why did Swope say it was the skipper—when obviously he had known nothing about the gold.

"The girl wouldn't of parted with it, except to save her father," Swope said. "You men saw that. Well, why kill him. She couldn't save him if he was dead. Keep him alive. He's the goose that laid the golden eggs. Kill the goose? Oh, no! Not if I know anything."

"What more truckin' have we with him, I'd like to know?" Brass asked. "Kill him, and play safe."

The negro scratched his black wool. "You mean you think she's got more, Mistah Swope?"

"Sure she's got more. Plenty of it. This ain't the end. She's got all she wants. That town ashore there has gone mad over her. Don't this prove it? She can get more."

Brass let out an oath. His master was plumb daft. No doubt about it. At any moment the apprehensive cooperer was expecting a posse of those bearded Argonauts to put off from shore and close in about them.

But the real fact of the matter was Brass did not realize the nature of the country he was in. Swope, on the other hand understood very well.

There was no law and order. The desertion of crews from their vessels was a common thing. San Francisco was not going to be put into a turmoil because some whaler from Bering Straits had come into the bay and was having a set-to with his crew.

Time to those Argonauts, as the saying went in those days, was worth "fifty dollars a minute." They were not going to mix into any forecastle brawl out there on the bay.

That was one angle of the situation. The other was this: Swope knew that Priscilla would do anything to save her father. She had already shown that. Her father—as Swope had said—must be kept alive, so that she could save him again.

"Here's my plan, men," he said. "We keep Bartlett on board. You don't object, skipper? We'll treat you like the pious New England gentleman you are. But your daughter goes ashore again—"

"And leave him—" the girl cried. "No, before God I—"

"Wait until you hear my offer, miss; wait just one minute, and I'll have it all out. You go ashore and sing. You won't have to sing more'n one night. It's your last night. Tell 'em that.

"And I'll wager they'll match this whole pile with their gifts. It's early yet. You'll have an hour or two before midnight, and it's then they're drunkest. You go ashore—"

"And leave my father in your hands—"

"No harm will come to him, I promise you that. No harm, that is to say. unless you yourself bring it. And I'll tell you how you can bring about that end: Just breathe a word about what's goin' on aboard this ship, and you'll never hear of your dear old dad again. See? Simple!"

"You mean Ah'll git twice as much as I'd git otherwise, Mistah Swope?" the cook asked, his eyes bulging.

"It's suicide!" Brass cried. "You mean we ain't even sendin' any one ashore to watch her?"

"What good would that do?" Swope asked. "How could we keep her from tellin'? Besides she could get

him bumped off—then all we've gained is to lose a man."

"Suicide. That's what we're doin' to ourselves," Brass wailed. "We got to get out. We got to burn our bridges behind us. Kill the old duffer. Tie the girl and throw her below with Joshua."

During this confab old Bartlett stood partly in the shadow dazed and mute while his daughter clung to him. They were two helpless prisoners at the bar. Whatever sentence these three judges passed upon them, they would have to accept. It might be death. That did not seem so terrible after all. It might mean separation. That was far more terrible.

"I can't leave him! I can't. You're asking too much! How much more do you fiends want? Isn't a fortune enough? What have I done that you want to keep this torture up!"

"Suicide!" Brass was grumbling.

"Pow'ful clever, Mr. Swope!" the sea-cook commented.

"She'll tell the first man she meets," Brass wailed.

"No fear of that," Swope said. "If she breathes a word to a soul, they'll come blusterin' along in their boats, thinkin' they can catch us. Well, they can't. She's a trim little whaleboat we got down there.

"We'll make for the shore up northward. Night'll help us. And they can't chase us in bigger craft without they shoal. We'll keep two men on watch. First sign of a boat makin' for us, and we're off—we and this old lubber. I mean what's left of him."

"You say I must go ashore and sing!" the girl cried in dismay.

"Sure you'll go ashore and sing," Swope laughed. "And bring back some more nuggets!"

The situation appealed to Swope, its author. He was beginning to see the extraordinary possibilities of his own drama. A girl sent ashore from a whaler to sing for gold. Three leeches waiting for her to return with her pay! A girl entertaining in a frontier gaming house—not daring to expose the conflicts within her bosom as she sang! Gamblers and miners and barkeeps listening to her, showering their wealth upon her.

And the three leeches out on the water, waiting! What could be more dramatic than that? It was a masterstroke of Swope's fevered imagination.

"And if you bring back enough nuggets," he went on gloatingly, "why, then the game's over. We leave you and your precious dad alive. And what's more, you'll never hear of us again."

"But to-morrow night—you'll make me do it again?" she asked helplessly.

"Maybe. If you don't bring back enough to-night. To-morrow night—seven more nights. I've got you where I want you now, lady, or else maybe you'll take a chance and tell somebody that your dad needs help? *That* would stop your theatrical engagement in a jiffy!"

"No, no!" she cried. "No—you understand only too well. Not while my father is aboard here with you murderers. No—I wouldn't dare! If I go you can be safe. You know it. I'll keep the secret.

"I only pray that they'll give me enough to feed your grasping, fiendish souls! I'll sing. I'll go. I'll bring back more. I'll beg them for their nuggets. I'll sing until I drop! But if you harm my father—"

"You can be assured, lady, he's safe—until we get a whiff of something in the wind. If you sic any one on us—"

"You think there's a millionth of a chance of that!" she shot back excitedly.

"It's not a millionth, lady," the mate answered with utmost assurance. "You've showed that you worship every gray hair of the old duffer's head. You wouldn't want to cause his death, I know. All right. Just remember that!"

The girl clung to her father. It was an indecisive, weak embrace. Old Bartlett felt as if his daughter had lost all power of will and action. She was like a doll with rag arms hooked somehow about his neck. It was precisely like these clowns you may have seen who dance with an effigy.

"Buck up now, child," he said softly, resolutely. "Don't be afraid any more."

"Leaving you here—" she began in a desperate moan.

"Never mind that. They won't touch me. What'll they gain by that? I'm safe."

"But if I get help," she whispered, "then they'll find out—"

"I know. I know. You can't get help. Don't try that. But when you get back, we'll trust to God. Time may bring some one. That's where they're making their mistake—killing time. Go on. Pray without ceasing. As the Book says, 'Fear not!'"

Swope and the cook went above with the girl. The doughboy was there leaning over the rail and studying the lights of the tent city. He was like a gargoyle leaning over the eaves of a medieval church watching the distant and inconsequential world of human beings. A gargoyle with a dog's body and an angel's face.

"Lettin' the skit go?" he exclaimed to the cook. "What the devil does this mean?"

"It means moah nuggets, sucklin'. That there's what-all it means. Nuggets, sucklin', nuggets!"

"You two men stay on watch," Swope ordered when the girl was sculling the boat shoreward. "Keep your eyes peeled over both rails and fore and aft—every point of the compass. If you see any one approachin' us, give the alarm, and we make off with what gold we've got."

"Ain't the skit goin' to get the whole dam' country up in arms ag'in' us?" the doughboy asked in his high, querulous voice.

"No," Swope chuckled grimly. "The skit's on our side."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DREAM COME TRUE.

JIM DORSEY was enduring his self-inflicted imprisonment in the old City Hotel. It was an irritating task. In the first place he could have been spending these hours—which were the gambling hours—in aggrandizing his already considerable fortune.

The proprietor of the hotel, according to the custom of the Gold Rush days in San Francisco when there were no banks, kept Dorsey's winnings in his safe.

But obviously they could be kept there no longer. Dorsey would have to get out of town. Just how long he would have to stay out, depended upon the little affair with Steve Lukon, proprietor of the Gold Rocker House.

A short while after he had immured himself in the hotel he called for one of the stable mozos—half Tiburon Indian, half Mexican—whom he had treated royally. He then instructed him to go to the Gold Rocker and find out what had happened.

The mozo returned with the news that Steve Lukon had been in a scrap with one of the gamblers, a gunfight which, as usual, had its beginning over a woman. The woman was the now famous entertainer from the Bay. The woman had fled, and so had the stranger. The latter had shot Steve Lukon.

"Did this toff—this stranger you talk about—kill Mr. Lukon?" Dorsey asked, nonchalantly blowing a smoke ring.

"No, *señor*," the breed answered. "The desperado, he is aim for the heart. But the bullet she is enter Lukon by the shoulder.

"The boss doctor is come. The Señor Proprietor is recover' and sits up and he mak great oath to every-

body, 'I will kill my enemy to death. I will get up posse. I will scour the hills—yes, the whole dam' countree from Klamath River to Mexico. And I kill him to death for this wound.'"

"Very fortunate he didn't get it in the heart," Dorsey said, emitting another ring. "Still, I dare say, they've already started the chase."

"Two or three barkeep mak' chase," the mozo went on. "They see the *señorita* alone in boat making for ship. The stranger ees disappear. No use chase him. Guests at cantina mak' witness Lukon shoot first. Ozzer man shoot for protect himself."

"Very nice, Miguel. Thank you. And, I say, here's a small nugget—a trifle. Wear it on your finger when currying horses, so as to remind yourself that you may some day be a gentleman. Thank you."

Dorsey was left alone to face his own dilemma. It would be wise to get out of town. No doubt about that. He was a marked man. Not that he was particularly afraid of Steve Lukon, who was now wounded, but there were his henchmen.

It would not be a matter of duelling. A barkeep hiding behind a shack sniping at him as he walked down the street—that would be the game.

He reflected that it would be a simple matter to get a horse and travel south. He had enough money to live like a Spanish caballero. But there was something that detained him.

He wanted to see that girl. The sight of her singing to those bearded and sousing frontiersmen had set him on fire. He was no longer the stowaway Dorsey, accepting her passionate admiration with a good-humored chivalry, and a good-humored indifference.

He was consumed with the memory of her. The image of her clothed in that dress of colored flowers and basque sleeves gripped his gambler's soul more completely than a royal flush.

To get out of town or to wait and take a chance with Steve Lukon; those were the two deliberatives.

He chose the latter. But in choosing it he continued to reflect on what must be done. He must get aboard that ship. In every cell of his body he felt a terrific yearning to get aboard. The old whale ship was calling to him. He felt the call ringing in his ears, vibrating through his body, gripping him, enticing him like the song of the sirens.

And there was no telling when the Cape Cod would put out for another whale hunt. Once she put out, Dorsey saw little possibility of ever finding the girl again.

But could he go now? Wouldn't Lukon's men be on the lookout for him, particularly down there at the Union Street wharf whence the girl had put off in her whaleboat?

What to do; how long to remain at the hotel; when to make a try at getting aboard—these were the questions! that began to beleaguer him. He might get a small craft off there to the westward of the city. There was a fishing settlement in the locality of what is now known as Baker's Beach.

There was a possibility: to get his carpet bag of gold from the hotel's safe, to get a horse, to trail off westward toward the Gate, then to cross the bay in a boat and approach the Cape Cod on the opposite side, this seemed a fairly safe plan.

The more he analyzed it, the more insistently came that call from the girl on the whale ship.

But when should he make the break? He went to the window. The tents across the way, the slushy streets, the chowcart, the assay shops going in full blast with crowds of anxious miners working as if it were daytime, all these were bathed in the clear light of the moon.

It was too bright a light to be riding through the streets a marked man. The moon would be setting shortly. Then—

But could he wait that long? He was in a frenzy to see that girl again. He was a lover counting the seconds which were eternities.

And then abruptly there came a knock at his door.

He started. He was not the self-composed Dorsey of an hour before. A restless lover, a hounded man, a prisoner yearning for freedom; a man yearning to reach his mate.

The knock might have been some one to warn him that he was being cornered. It might mean his enemies themselves.

He drew his pistol, then advanced to the door and resolutely pulled it open.

He saw there what he confidently thought was an hallucination. It was, indeed, a vision more ethereal than the definite and lifelike image in his mind which for that hectic hour he had been worshiping so fervently.

Priscilla was there, clothed in the same shimmering dress, a radiant splash of color, of embroidered flowers, of bonnet hanging over slim shoulders revealing a mass of touseled golden curls.

He reached out to her with his arms, as if to touch her and see for himself whether or not this was a figment of his excited brain.

And she sank forward toward him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GOING BACK.

IT was some time before Dorsey could get any inkling of the reason for this strange visit. He saw that the girl was incoherent, violently perturbed, terrified.

Groping blindly for something to set her at ease, he mentioned what he had heard about Steve Lukon. Lukon was not murdered. She need have no fear about that.

But this did not seem to be her trouble at all. That little scrap at the cantina was as far removed from her thoughts as some incident on Mars. In fact she did not listen to him as he spoke. She sank into a chair, and moaned and wrung her hands, and wept with dry, tearless sobs.

"What in the world is the matter, my child? What has happened? Have these bally ragamuffins attacked you? Thought you'd got back to the old ship. I wanted to see you—I longed to see you — yearned for you — but, dash it all, what brought you here? Coming here to my lodgings at this time of night—a little girl to see a rozzer like me! Jove, it's astounding!"

"I had to come, I had to. You're the only one in the world. You've got to help me. My father—no, I can't tell you. I'm afraid."

"I say, look here, what's happened to your father? Not dead from that wound? Oh, no. Tell me. You can't? Well, look here, let me say something: I'm the one that 'll help—if there's help needed.

"Confound it all, I was just about to pack up and try to get aboard your old boat, so help me God! Couldn't keep away from you. Discovered all of a sudden, you know that I—that you—hang it, what shall I say? How can I help you stop that confounded sobbing? You aren't crying. What the deuce *are* you doing?"

"I'm thanking the dear God in heaven that you did not come aboard," she exclaimed. "For then—they would have—"

She stopped, still babbling, still incoherent, tortured with uncertainty and fear. She looked him in the eyes. It would have been very easy to tell that he was worshiping her as a devotee worships a saint, but she was not thinking of that now—important as it was.

Perhaps she had seen that light in his eyes when he got up to the stage at Steve Lukon's and stopped her song. Perhaps it was the memory of that

revelation which brought her here. He had told her that he would take her to the City Hotel, and here—as if transported by magic, she found herself before him.

Immediately upon setting foot upon the shore she had thought of him. But that was all. She did not for a moment consider telling him what had happened. That was a taboo that could not be broken except on pain of death—death to her beloved father.

And yet something had forced her to go to Dorsey's Hotel. It was as if an unseen power had taken her by the hand and led her there without a faltering step.

Just what he could do she did not know. He could not go aboard and fight those killers. They would see him coming. But he *must* be told. There might be some way, opened to them by the mercy of Heaven.

He had an uncanny power at winning gun fights. But who could he fight? And when? And how?

As she looked up out of fearful, pain-ridden eyes, and saw the baffled adoration reflecting back, she wondered: Could she dare tell this one man? Would he be wise and self-contained and crafty?

Or would he blunder right out there with his pistol with which he solved all problems, and hound those rats to their death? He was hot-headed—that he had shown when in the cantina. Wouldn't her story throw him into a fury?

"You'll help—I know that—"

"Of course I will. But if it's an urgent matter, I suggest we hurry. What do you want me to do? No matter, I'll do it. I'll go to the end of creation. Just command me. But why take so confoundedly long about it?"

"There's plenty of time," she said, trying hard to collect her wits. "There's an hour or more—before I can go back. And until then, we can only wait."

"At the end of an hour what do you want me to do?" he asked eagerly.

"I don't know, I can't think. It's impossible to find a way out. I'm crazed. I can't dare to say a word about it. But I must. You're the one that's got to hear. If I could only get my thoughts together.

"If I tell you, you'll go out there to the Cape Cod and start fighting. But that's just what you mustn't do. If they see you, they'll kill my father."

"They? Who do you mean?"

"I mean Swope—he's back."

"My word!"

Having blurted this out, she seemed to regret. She got up, wrung her hands in despair, paced up and down the room.

"My word!" Dorsey repeated. Then he began to chuckle. "Swope back. Well, well. But what of it? Quite a simple matter to dispatch Mr. Swope."

"And three of his cutthroat forecastle rats," the girl went on.

"I see. Three of them. Well, I've already shot three of Mr. Swope's rats. And I fancy I could pick off three more." He chuckled in genial good humor. "My child, stop that sobbing. I'll finish all four of them. Quite simple. But dash it all, why wait an hour?"

She went to him, her heart suddenly opening to him. He was a refuge, a strength, a pillar of rock to cling to in time of storm. A feeling of boundless confidence, adoration, love, swept over her. She grasped him tightly, throwing her arms about his neck.

"If only you could come back with me!" she burst out.

"Of course. Intended to right along. We'll wait an hour, as you say, if such a ridiculous rule has been made, and then we'll go aboard. Quite simple."

"No, no. If they see you—they'll kill my father. Can't you understand? They told me to come ashore and sing at the gaming house and get more nuggets, then bring the gold to them. But

if they see any one else coming they'll kill my father—who's their prisoner. Perhaps they'll torture him first, then kill him, and escape."

"My crikey!" he exclaimed. "What an extraordinary game those ruffians are trying to play!"

She had left him again, and was pacing the little room, her face writhing in despair.

"Now wait," he said. "It's quite simple. Let's find a way. No reason to go on with that sobbing. Quite simple. They're keeping the old gentleman hostage. you say. Sending you ashore to sing for their supper. Jove, how astounding!"

He fell into a tense moment of silence. There must be some way. "Quite simple," he said again, then repeated it every so often, even though he had not the slightest idea of what to do. In fact it was far from simple. It looked impossible.

"Let's see now. How do I get on board? That's the question. Ought to be simple. I have it! You go first, then I follow—no, confound it, they'd keep a guard posted after you went aboard. Silly idea!"

He brooded for what seemed another eternity, the girl stopping in the middle of the room and looking up at him with a fierce, anxious intensity. "Let's see," he went on. "If I went aboard first, and you followed — no, dash it all. Your father would be pounced on. Quite a Chinese puzzle! Simply rotten, I'd say. But let me think."

She sank into a chair, and he took his turn at pacing up and down. "Should be easy." He turned to her abruptly. "How much time are they giving you to get back?"

"As much time as I'd ordinarily sing."

"I see. Well, you mustn't go back for an hour at least. They would suspect. That's one bright side of the question. We've got lots of time to hatch up something." He went on pacing, stopping periodically to look into her face.

He drank in her beauty, standing there in absolute worship, as if praying to an image for inspiration. And she looked up at him with the same adoration—drawing upon his face for light.

"One hour!" he said. "H-m. The answer ought to come. Here, I'm going to have a drink. One hour. And then we go aboard and finish 'em. Let's see now—" As he went about pouring the drinks he tried desperately—more desperately than he let her think—to find the solution.

But as he held the glass to his lips he drew it back with an abrupt gesture, and smacked it on the table. "I have it!" he cried. "No, don't get up! Sit where you are. Listen to what I say. We must take our time. Here—" He reached for the glass again. "We must be cool—cool as cucumbers. Plenty of time, as you say. Now then: What do you think? I shall go aboard as a mutineer—as a long-lost member of the gang. A bit of all right! Don't you think?"

She gasped. "What do you mean? You're going on board—"

"And see Swope — as an old friend—"

"But—"

"It 'll be a bit awkward getting aboard, perhaps—but I'll announce myself, don't you see, before they shoot me, and what's infinitely more important, before they shoot your father. A bit of all right, I'd say."

"You mean you think they'll let you aboard—let *you,* of all men!"

"I, of all men, am just the one they'll not suspect. Perhaps you forget that I joined that mutiny of theirs at the start."

"Yes, but that was to help us—"

"They don't know that. Unless Joshua bunged the word."

"He told me," the girl said. "But he wouldn't have told them. Why should he? We can be sure of that."

"Good. Then everything's settled. I go aboard and ask to see Mr. Swope. I talk with him for a few moments, then— Well, then our troubles are all over."

"They'll take your gun away from you. They'll probably kill you."

"Not likely. I'll take two guns. They can jolly well disarm me of one. But the other I'll keep under the thwart of my boat."

"What boat?"

"Quite right. What boat? Not your boat. That's part of my plan. I shan't go in your boat. That would be nonsense. I shall follow you in another boat, which I dare say I can pick up under the lee of some convenient ship or other. Then at, let us say, midnight, you can put off from shore. I'll follow, keeping under the shadow of any ships I can find.

"But when they see you coming—"

"Now wait! You board the Cape Cod and you can engage whoever is on guard in conversation—perhaps all four, but it makes no difference. Show them your gold. I dare say that 'll take their minds off the water for a moment or two.

"During which time I'll pull like mad for the old ship. Just to get within hailing distance, mind you. Once that close, I'll announce myself. Very simple."

In her excitement and desperation the girl tried to visualize the consequences of this move. It did not sound simple to her. It sounded suicidal. Instead of having one beloved life in jeopardy, there would be two: her father's, and this man's.

"I can't imagine it!" she said. "How do I know I can keep their attention while you are approaching. They will be wary. Warier at that time than any other—"

This baffled him for a moment. He paced again. "H-m, let me see! They will be wary. You say wary. Yes, quite! I dare say. H-m!" Then abruptly. "Jove, I have it! They'll be wondering how much more gold you've brought them. What say? *That's* what 'll distract them.

"Why, dash it all, look here—aren't they playing an astounding game of chance, just for the sake of more gold? Avaricious bleeders! Why, the thought of gold will stupefy 'em. It's like holding ether to their nose. Can't you see that?"

"Then you mean I must go to the cantina and sing?"

"Nonsense! You know my sentiments on that point. You'll go near no cantina."

"But the gold—I won't have any."

"Quite right. That's just what will distract them!" He laughed. "Can't you see my point? You'll have no gold. They'll go crazy. What could be more simple! Moreover, you can send them down to your boat to search for it under the thwarts. They'll be raving! And while they rave I heave to! What could be neater than that?"

"But you'll jeopardize your life! I knew it! I knew you'd sacrifice everything!"

"Stuff and nonsense. I'm not jeopardizing my life. I'm only worried about the old skipper. As for me, I'll take care of myself with those rozzers. As gunmen they're jolly good harpooners."

The outward calm with which he had completely covered up his actual misgivings of the situation was enough to reassure the distracted girl.

His very flippancy was like balm to her. It seemed like a mere flicking of ashes from his cigarette, the incidental way in which he announced: "I'll go and see this Mr. Swope; then our troubles would be over."

Her faith in him was implicit. He was supernatural in his power. He could do no wrong. He could not fail. He was immune to their clumsy firearms. She had a deeply rooted conviction that his life was actually charmed.

"I shall be going," he said finally.

"I must go a good way up the beach. Stay here and be calm. It 'll be quite all right—the whole mess. Don't worry.

"Allow me, say, three-quarters of an hour, and I'll be out on the bay in some sort of craft or other. At midnight you put off from shore. That's all there is to it. Quite simple."

She put out her hands to him, and he grasped them, kissing them, not chivalrously as was his habit in such cases, but with a long, a hungry caress. The very ferocity of his kisses reassured her.

He could do no wrong. He bore a charmed life. Luck—that made some men rich in old San Francisco, and some men beggars—had picked him out as her own. He was Luck's favorite son. He was indomitable.

But when he left she fell to her knees and prayed feverishly, madly, during that eternity which spanned the interval until midnight.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TWO SHOTS.

IT was likewise an eternity of waiting for Swope and Brass, for the sea-cook and the doughboy, and for their prisoner, Skipper Bartlett. They had taken turns guarding the old man, while three stayed above leaning over the rail and eagerly watching the shore line or the surrounding ships for a sign of an attack.

It must be said, however, that not one of the five men expected trouble, with the possible exception of Tom Brass.

Swope was confident that the girl would not dare to breathe a word of her plight. The negro, who was a happy-go-lucky scoundrel, put an unbounded and childish faith in the mate's machinations.

The doughboy, bloodthirsty and imaginative, did not care one way or another. He was at the age when most of our gunmen of to-day commit their crimes. If an attack came, he would at least have the thrill of using his gun—a thrill which his cautious master had insistently denied him.

These two latter, the negro and the doughboy, remained on guard, one on each side of the ship. Swope watched eagerly for an hour, then went below to count up the gold hoard.

Brass was sitting on a bunk opposite the old skipper, watching him out of wide-open, fiery red eyes. The skipper with clasped, manacled hands and bowed head, was patiently waiting.

Above, Slushy and the doughboy, walking the deck, stopped periodically to vie with each other as to who was the most nonchalant in this hour of tense danger.

"How you feelin', sucklin'?" the cook chuckled. "How come you're so green about the gills?"

"I ain't green. I'm hopin' they come. Let 'em come—I'm ready. You ain't seen me in action yet."

"They won't come."

"Let 'em come. Hope she tells. Hope they come. I want to use this—" He kept taking his pistol out of his belt and caressing it. "Let 'em come."

"Let who come? Ain't no one goin' to come to this party—except the lil angel herself, bringin' mo' nuggets—for me and the mate—and maybe Brass."

This got under the boy's skin.

"You ain't forgettin' how much I'm goin' to ask for this night's work? One-quarter—that's how much. As much as Swope gets, I get."

"Swope will give you a couple of quills of dust. That's all. Saw him dividin' it, sucklin. You'll be lucky if you get a chicken quill of dust. Only chickens don't have quills."

He went off, his mountainous shoulders heaving rhythmically, his fingers snapping, his feet shuffling. It was an idiosyncrasy of his; when he was tickled, he was tickled all over, until he cakewalked on the deck.

The boy brooded until, making the length of the deck, they met again.

"You say Swope's dividin' the stuff?"

"Thought that 'd get you, sucklin'. Co'se he's dividin' it. Into three parts." He burst into the pantomime of a guffaw—a laugh that had no sound.

"I'll kill the damned rotten skunk, so help me God!" the boy burst out.

"Hold on now, compose yo'self you lil sucklin'. Articulate yo'self! Somethin's out there yonder on the water."

The boy was in the throes of a fury. "I'll kill him, so help me God!" he muttered fiercely.

"Over yonder—see?"

The boy, still spewing out his oaths, turned slowly, dully.

"It's the lil angel!" the cook exclaimed. "And she's alone!"

They waited, leaning over the rail and peering intently at the black expanse of water. The moonlight, shooting long, slanting beams through torn clouds, singled out the whaleboat, and the slim small figure at the stern.

"Go below, sucklin', and tell the mate."

"I'll murder him!"

"Forget your impulses, boy, and come to life. Go below."

"Not me. She's got men hidin' under the thwarts, or I'm a liar."

The negro held his breath and watched.

"Ain't no one in that boat but the lil angel," he said.

"Still and all, we'll wait till she gets alongside so's I can see under them thwarts."

This was a wise precaution. The negro was glad enough to have company. They watched the longboat slide smoothly toward the vessel, crossing her bows, and coming out to the moonlit side. For this move on the part of the girl the two guards were thankful, even though it necessitated their crossing to the offshore side of the vessel.

They could look down sheer into the open boat, and convince themselves that there was no one in her except the woman at the oar.

She ran up the Jacob's ladder immediately and, climbing over the foreworks, stopped in front of them.

"Where-all's your night's pay, lil angel?" the cook asked.

"Below there—in the bottom boards. The handbag was too heavy."

The doughboy was already peering downward. He could see no handbag.

"Go down there, sucklin', and get the lady's luggage," the negro ordered.

"I'll get it," the boy said with an oath. "And I'll keep my share of it. I'll keep more'n a few quills of it, so help me!"

He leaped over the rail, ran down the ropes, and after a moment's search called up softly. "'Tain't here."

"Nonsense. Of course it's there," the girl said.

"She's playin' a trick."

"A trick?" the cook said. "Oh, no. Not this lil angel. It's there. Don't keep it. Bring it up."

"I'll tell you, the boat's empty!" the boy called again. He searched the boat beneath the decking, and all the thwarts from the stem to the big yard-wide tub at the stern. Then, satisfied that the girl had come empty-handed, he boarded the vessel again.

The cook was skeptical.

"Call Swope, and I'll go down."

"I won't call him. He'll throw a fit. Let the girl go and meet him. She's free to come and go, accordin' to the old skunk. Let her explain to him."

The cook went down the ladder, and the girl, casting an anxious glance over her shoulder off the bow, slipped off aft. Her first and most vital concern now was to see how her poor father fared. Peering down the companionway, she could look farther aft through the steerage door.

Three men were there. The lanky, red-whiskered Brass was on guard, nervously fingering a pistol. Swope was seated, sipping coffee—or rather,

he seemed to lap it, and then look up, grinning at his prisoner. He was like a cat lapping milk.

The skipper was seated on a bunk, a dejected squat hulk, the picture of helpless misery.

The girl felt assured they had not harmed him. But the moment had come when he was in dire jeopardy. If Dorsey should prove so rash as to fire a gun, the girl was certain her father would pay for the act—most probably with his life.

She hastened back again to the mainmast, hiding behind the main hatchway, from which point she could see what was going on forward.

Scarcely a minute elapsed before she heard the doughboy calling out in voiceless gasps: "Slushy! Hey! Quick! Bear a hand, you black lubber. They are comin'! She's tricked us! I knew it! Get up here, you lubber!"

The negro loomed up at the bowsprit, a giant form like a black figurehead arising and turning around to haunt its ship.

"Where away?" the shadow asked.

The doughboy was at his side, pointing excitedly toward the square-rigger riding a bit westward to them at her anchor.

The black water was patchy with streaks of moonlight and black streaks of cloud shadows. Into the light and out again slipped a small rowboat.

"Belay that puffin', you old walrus!" the doughboy cautioned. "Can't hear a thing."

The frightened negro held his breath, and the sound of a man's voice drifted across the water to them.

"I say there! Ship ahoy! Oh, I say!"

"Don't 'zactly sound like an attack!" the cook remarked in some relief.

"Can't tell. He's comin' right on the heels of the girl. That don't look like it just happened. It's a trick."

"Oh, I say! Ship ahoy! You up there!"

The doughboy let out an astonished oath. "B' George, it's one of our gang."

"Get Swope," the negro whispered.

"Not me. I'm through with the double-dealin' jackal!"

"Sure, I'll get him!" the negro said as if to himself. "I ain't goin' to be surrounded and taken prisoner. No, suh—not this black boy!"

He turned on his heel and was about to run aft, when he heard the doughboy laughing.

"Where you goin'? Stay here with me. They ain't attackin'. It's one of our own gang."

"How come you mean our own gang?"

"It's that Sydney Duck—that landsman—the stowaway who fought with us. Wake up and stop puffin' like a porpoise."

"Ah declare!" the cook exclaimed.

"Don't shoot him. Let him come closer; then I'll shoot him."

"We got to tell Swope," the negro whispered again.

"Swope be damned! Let's surprise this Duck."

Both men stood, their guns ready.

The rowboat had skimmed across a few more patches of moonlight and was moving swiftly toward them, a ripple of phosphorescence at her bows.

"Holloa up there! You two men! Can I come aboard?"

The negro's shoulders began to ripple. This was quite a joke. Here were four mutineers in command of a ship, frightened to death at the merest sign of any one approaching them, and what should turn up but this debonair Englishman asking if he could come aboard.

"What-all did I hear you say?" the cook called down.

"'Pon my word—the ship's cook! Glad to see you! But what the devil's happened? Thought this ship was deserted."

"Deserted?" the doughboy echoed. "That's a good one!"

"Is it safe to come aboard?" the Englishman asked.

"Mr. Man, you don't know how funny you talk!" the cook laughed.

"Confound it all! I've got to come aboard. It's the only safe place in this bloomin' country. They've threatened my life back there on shore, and I've got to hide."

The doughboy, who was the quicker at thinking as well as at seeing or hearing, reflected that this might have something to do with their own mutiny. Here was one of the original mutineers fleeing forever.

"What are they after you for?" he called down. He wanted to get what he could out of this unfortunate intruder—and then pot him.

"For my winnings," Dorsey shot back readily.

"Winnings? Wh-what winnings?" the negro asked.

"My winnings at cards for the past week. Can't leave the stuff ashore. The town is full of ruffians, claim-jumpers, and that sort of thing. I heard this ship was deserted, so I picked her out as my refuge. Let me aboard, I say."

"He still thinks he's one of the gang," the doughboy laughed.

"Thinks he's a mutineer," said the giant negro, his great shadowy hulk rippling in chuckles.

"Come on and welcome," the boy called gleefully.

"But look here, is this straight? I'm on your side, you know. I want to know who else is on this ship?"

"No one. The skipper's in irons. And there's four of Swope's gang. We're sailing out the Gate to-morrow."

"Sounds a bit of all right," Dorsey said. He was standing up in the little skiff, holding his carpet bag. "Then you'll help me out?"

"Course we'll help you out. We'll take care of you," the boy said.

The negro began to puff again, his breath coming in excited grunts. He recalled that this "stowaway" had been a rather dangerous-looking customer. "We got to tell Swope," he said under his breath.

"The hell with Swope. I want to see that grip he's carryin'."

The grunting stopped. The negro had to admit his young companion was a quick thinker.

Dorsey was coming cautiously up the ladder, using one hand to help in the ascent, and the other to hoist the carpet bag.

The carpet bag was a dead weight, for, as he had announced, it actually contained the winnings of a week's work at his trade.

It was the weapon in which he put the most faith. He had two pistols, but one would unquestionably be taken from him. With the other he could dispatch one man at a time, and each time he would have to reload.

And there was the added uncertainty about whether he could hide that second pistol without arousing their suspicions. The right move was to hide it—not on his person—but at a convenient place on board.

He thought of dropping it as soon as he climbed over the rail, but how could he prevent its clattering when it fell to the deck? If he had boarded the vessel at the foreshrouds there might have been some way to hitch the weapon to the deadeyes or some other part of the rigging. But this would be a trick for a legerdemainist.

As he was groping eagerly for a way out of this difficulty, his hand felt an open hole in the rail, from which a belaying pin had been removed.

Heaven itself could not have arranged a more perfect expediency. As Dorsey climbed over the rail, swinging his heavy hand bag with one hand, he held his other behind him—inserting the muzzle of his gun in the rail.

It stuck up there like a belaying pin; but a chance ray of moonlight passing through a tear in the canopy of clouds, singled it out, pointing at it like a finger.

Dorsey was facing the two men. He glanced over his shoulder—and there it was, the pistol sticking out of the rail like a belaying pin with some new-fangled sort of handle.

For all he knew the men were looking straight at it. How could they help seeing it?

But their eyes were completely and intensely engaged at focusing upon three other points: upon Dorsey's face; upon the hand bag, and upon the wide sweep of the horizon, for another sign of coming attackers.

The pistol just stuck there, in full view, unnoticed, ready.

As Dorsey had confidently expected, both men shoved their guns into him. The negro stayed behind him, pressing his gun muzzle into his back the moment he set foot on deck.

In front of him was the doughboy looking up with a broad, triumphant grin. His white oval face, dim enough in the moonlight so that his skin blemishes were invisible, was the face of a Raphael cherub.

"Sorry, Mr. Sydney Duck, you was one of us, and you helped us. But the game's changed since we saw you last."

"Dash it all, what the devil does this mean? What? My hands up? I say, this is an outrage!"

"Take his gat, Slushy."

The boy in this crisis had proved himself the master. The giant negro was only a henchman.

Slushy obeyed eagerly enough.

"What's this? Taking my gun? I say, this is rotten! You blighters!"

"Oh, yes, I dare say!" the doughboy mocked in his high voice. "Bally rotten. But not rotten for us. What's in that bag?"

"That's my affair. Nothing for you—it's my affair."

"Set it on deck."

Dorsey obeyed. The boy opened it, while his black companion looking over the shoulder of his prisoner, peered eagerly at this new windfall.

"It's gold all righto, Slushy. Nuggets, and gold dust! Not bad!"

"Ah declare!" the negro exclaimed. "More gold! How much is there in this country? Everybody packin' it around in satchels! Lawdy!"

"Look here, you buffleheads! You can't touch a grain of that."

"Oh, we can't, hey?" the boy laughed. "Why not? That's what I'd like for to know."

"It's mine."

"Oh, no, it ain't. It's mine," the boy said softly.

"What-all you mean, sucklin'?" the negro interrupted. "It's for the gang. Swope and me and Brass."

"You think so?" the doughboy shot back. "Well, Swope don't get a whiff of this stuff. It's for you and me, Slushy. Punch yourself; you're snorin' again."

"For me and you!" the negro exclaimed. His face still peering over Dorsey's shoulder was a mask of incredulous anticipation. He licked his massive lips. "What you mean by that, chile?"

"Just what I say. Swope don't have to know."

"You're pretty wise for a little chile!" the negro exclaimed, his mouth watering.

"Outrageous!" Dorsey was grumbling. "Sticking me up like this when I'm one of the set! Beastly!"

"What-all will we do with this gen-'leman?" the negro asked of his newly found master.

"Kill him."

"Hold on! What're you talking about?" Dorsey cried. "Take the gold. Take it and be damned. I can get all I want. But don't shoot. Don't be silly. Why, Swope will hear the rumpus, and then how much of this stuff will you get?"

"That there's a point, Ah do declare!" the negro said.

"Of course it's a point. Don't ever do this trick. Let me go. I'll go peaceably. I won't make a sound. Swope

won't know a word about it. A good bargain. I want my life. What do I care for that stuff? My life—that's all. A bargain."

The doughboy, with his oval face turned up to the moonlight, seemed to be perplexed. Every chance thus far to satiate his great ambition to kill a man was frustrated. There always seemed to be some excellent reason why murder was the least advisable course.

Dorsey saw now that he had the upper hand. His one big weapon—that carpet bag of gold—had struck the first blow.

"You won't shoot. I'm not afraid of your guns. Might as well put them up. Holding me up with your guns you don't dare discharge. Silliest thing I ever heard in my life."

He was beginning to assume his usual nonchalance. Outwardly he appeared quite triumphant. But at the same moment he was contemplating his next move.

He might draw his own gun from the rail and take his turn at holding his captors up. But this would be delicate. He himself would not dare to fire it. It would be a matter of bluffing each other out.

Perhaps, on the other hand, he could take a chance at a fist fight. The boy would be easily dispatched—but the negro was a different matter. It might take several blows to knock him out. Meanwhile the commotion would warn Swope.

It was at this very point in his dilemma that Swope came up on deck! He had heard the low-pitched voices from far aft there in the steerage, and he had the impression that the girl must have boarded the ship.

Coming to the companionway, he found Priscilla standing on the ladder, her head peering out on deck.

"Holloa there! So you're back! As I thought. Where's the money?"

The girl, taken by surprise, tried to stammer something, at the same time realizing that she must warn Dorsey.

Dorsey, however, was taking care of himself. The boy had heard Swope's voice and had snapped out in a voiceless cry:

"All right, let him go. Bear a hand. Smart there now. Over the rail—and you won't be touched."

Dorsey had extracted his gun from the rail and climbed over. But he did not descend to his skiff. Instead he hung there on the Jacob's ladder, waiting.

"Where's the money?" Swope repeated. "Collect yourself. Don't be afraid of me, miss. I ain't a reptile. Give me your money."

"The money—yes, I know. I made a lot. It's there—forward—they've got it. Those two men."

Swope swung up the companion ladder, elbowing her unceremoniously out of the way. But as he brushed past her she added quickly: "They hid it between the foremast and hatchway."

She did not know whether he had heard this or not. He was so excited that he was off without a word, prowling along the decks like a cat stalking two helpless birds.

"How much did she bring?" he asked.

"How much? Wh-what you mean, how much?" the sea-cook asked.

"I said, how much?"

"Nothin', suh, nothin'. Wasted her time. Just went ashore stallin'."

"Reckon she was goin' to get some one to come and fight us—but then lost her nerve," the boy supplemented. "Anyways, she didn't do no singin' when ashore." He was able to lie much more easily than the big negro.

Swope did not appear to be astonished, as they had expected. He did not even appear to be mad. But it was only his face that they saw leering at them.

They did not know what was going on behind that complacent mask. He was burning with a cool white fury. He wanted to kill both of these double-dealing whelps as they stood there

making up their easy lies. But he noted that they both had their guns drawn.

"Seen any signs of an attack?"

"None. She came alone. Not a boat anywheres."

"Very well, then. I'll tend to the little skit, the sweet-voiced little mopsey! The little bat! But meanwhile we got to get on our way. I'll send Brass up to take your place. Then you two come down and get your share of what gold we've got. It's plenty."

"Aye, aye, sir. It's best we get goin'. We must be up in the tule swamps afore mornin," the boy said.

"Keep a sharp lookout till Brass comes. The skit might of tricked us."

He left them, and the two luckless devils had no inkling of the white-hot fury consuming their master. Nor did they see him glance out of the corner of his fishy eyes at the dark space between foremast and hatchway.

In that one glance Swope caught sight of a corner of a flowered carpet bag. He was satisfied. Still keeping his discovery to himself, he headed for the companionway.

The girl fled on down the companionway before him. She was assured that up on deck all was well. Dorsey would play his final card at the right time.

Meanwhile, she must hasten to her father.

In the steerage, Swope ordered Brass to relieve the other two guards. "No calking off now, Brass," he warned. "There may yet be an attack. And I'll be down here—don't know how long."

"We got to hurry and be off, Swope—I'm beggin' you," Brass said.

"Go above, and watch sharp."

Brass left, and a moment later the negro and the doughboy came below. The negro was furtive, anxious, his huge lips trembling. He was sniffling like a porker that smells a potato underground. He hung his head and peered upward from under overhanging brows at Swope.

The boy's face was a marked contrast—pale but triumphant, with almost humorous eyes. He wore a smirk as if to say:

"Thought you could hold out on my share, did you? Well, I put a good one over on you this time, Mr. Swope."

"I've got your share in here, Hiram my boy," Swope said, standing at the door of the captain's cabin. "Come on in."

"In there?"

A cloud passed over the boy's forehead.

Swope was pointing into the captain's cabin. "Shake a leg, get in there, son," he said in a brotherly, jovial way. He put his arm about the boy. "A good share for you, Hiram. You are a right sharp little partner. A good bit, enough to last you your life. You won't be a whaler's steward any more. No, sir!"

With a friendly slap on the back he urged the boy in.

Stepping in after him, Swope closed the door gently.

The girl, who had seen this drama from the steerage, came to the door, leading her father by the arm.

The old skipper followed submissively in a dumb stupor, not knowing what the girl knew—that Dorsey was on board, and that, consequently, victory was at hand.

The girl's one desire now was to get to the deck with her father. But as she stepped out of the steerage door she saw the looming form of Slushy, the cook, who barred her way.

Not that Slushy was paying any particular attention to her. He was more concerned with getting his half of the swag.

He was impatient at the delay. Why had Swope taken them in separately? Why had he closed the door?

"Dividin' it up to suit his Lord Almighty self!" the negro muttered. "Gwine to trick the little kid, and don't want fo' me to see? All right. Trick him all you want. He won't ob-

ject. Nor will this here burrhead. Ah'm satisfied."

He chuckled to himself. It was a good joke: Swope tricking the doughboy out of his share, not knowing how the angel-faced doughboy had tricked him.

A good turn of tables—a delightful jest! The negro's mountainous shoulders rippled. He snapped his fingers. Half of the Englishman's enormous winnings, and a part of Swope's swag—that would make any black man cakewalk.

And that is just what he was doing. While the girl waited breathlessly for the sound of death to come from behind the bulkhead of the captain's cabin, this giant African was actually dancing!

The girl clutched frantically to her father's iron arm. Dumbly, stupidly he whispered:

"There, there, baby, we'll get out of it all right. God is merciful."

He did not understand her sudden hysteria.

Then it came—a thud to the deck interrupting the boy's rapid gibbering. The girl turned white. The sea-cook cocked an ear, but the sound had no significance to him. It might have been the falling of that satchel to the deck.

A heavy satchel—heavy gold—unlimited wealth—gin, idleness, women, song, drunkenness, luxury beyond a sea-cook's imagination—luxury after years of cooking scouse and bergoo and plum duff!

Slushy snapped his fingers, shuffled his feet, licked his lips as if he already had a foretaste of the champagne he would drink.

Then Swope came out.

He stood there a moment, a set, inscrutable grin on his face. His right hand hung somewhat behind him, as though he were holding something he wanted to hide.

His eyes, inhuman, bulging like a dead carp's, were focused on the skulking mass of black shadow which was the African.

There was a moisture on the African's upper lip. His low forehead wrinkled and turned wet, so that it shone like a freshly blackened boot.

His eyes caught Swope's glance, then dropped automatically, guiltily. And as they dropped, they focused to the deck upon a round black spot that had dripped from Swope's unseen hand into a circle of light.

The truth came to Slushy: he was found out.

With a whimper, ridiculously small in comparison with that huge red-lipped mouth, the negro cried out, just as the doughboy had tried to cry out:

"It was him that done it, Mistah Swope. Not me, I swear to the Almighty. I wouldn't do you that turn, Mistah Swope.

"Ah'm faithful, Ah am! Was gwine to tell you, Mistah Swope, so help me God! It's up there betwixt fo'mast and fo'hatch. Carpet bag. Yes, sah. It's all yours. Don't want a sniff of it. Mistah Swope, please—Ah beg—"

The huge jowls glistened with sweat—a rim of white showed around the terrified pupils of his eyes. His voice went weaker, higher, till it cracked and petered into unintelligible sobs.

"Come here, Slushy, my man."

Slushy's feet shuffled weakly. His hand, weighing like tons at the end of the long gorilla arms, tried vainly to creep back to his belt. There was his gun. But what good is a gun when two paralyzed hams hang at the end of your arms?

He shuffled once, hesitating in a grotesque parody of his once graceful cake-walk; then whirled about as if a galvanic current had been turned into him.

As he whirled, life seemed to come again to his fear-stricken nerves. His feet were like the feet of a deer; his hands responded to the terrified signal of his brain, and yanked out his pistol.

Swope leaped after him, both men

vanishing like shadows from the circle of light to the somber darkness before the mizzenmast.

Old Skipper Bartlett and the girl saw two sharp flashes of light, heard the deafening reports, followed by the simultaneous clatter of a heavy body and a dropped gun somewhere forward near the companionway.

A few moments of quiet; Swope was in the dark, fumbling about. Then he came prowling aft into the light until he saw the old man and the girl.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"THAR AGAIN!"

TOM BRASS, with narrow shoulders hunched as if expecting a blow from some unseen enemy aloft in the shrouds, paced from forecastle to poop. In one hand he held his pistol, in the other a spyglass. With this latter he periodically squinted at the moonlit water, at the row of lights on shore, at the ships riding at anchor all about him, like huge blackbirds sleeping.

They should have been gone long ago; that was Tom Brass's deeply rooted conviction. Something might happen. Swope had started a desperately dangerous game in the first place, a game that could only end with the whole gang of them swinging on the gallows. And this last phase of it—sending that girl ashore for more gold—was sheer lunacy.

Who could tell what was happening at this very moment? How could they be sure she had not recruited an army of gunmen to hound them to their death?

Who could tell but that they might have taken to rowboats and stood out for the bay to wait until their victims attempted to sail for the Sacramento? The whole country would be up in arms—if the girl told her story.

At least that was Tom Brass's firm belief. He had done nothing as yet which would arouse any very serious interest on the part of the gold-crazed Argonauts of San Francisco. Nevertheless, he suffered the torture of the guilty man who magnifies his deed, so that it seems the whole world must be eager for his blood.

It was during this mental agony that Tom Brass, reaching the forecastle again, looked down over the rail. He saw the whaleboat in which the girl had come from shore. And he saw something else:

It was a small skiff, that had certainly not been there when Swope and he and their two companions had first come aboard.

A peculiar change came over the lanky scarecrow, standing up there on the forecastle deck. A scarecrow surely enough—but one which was caught by a slight puff of wind. A man giving one shudder like a scarecrow responding to a puff, that was the picture.

Then abruptly he whirled around with the dreadful assurance that an enemy was up there in the shrouds, ready to pounce upon him like a python waiting on a tree limb.

He looked aloft, scanning the pursed sails and rigging in one terrified sweep of his eyes. Then he tried vainly to pierce the denser splotches of shadow on deck: the deck house, the hatchways, the caboose, the grating, the pumps, the masts.

If he could only get to Swope and his companions without calling out. He did not dare to raise his voice. In fact it is to be doubted whether or not he could have emitted more than a tremulous howl. Nor did he dare to pass so much as the foremast in an attempt to get to the companionway.

He merely stood there, a formless scarecrow, a bunch of old clothes held up by a stake, which in this case was the shaking skeleton of a man.

He was congealed with fear, gripped with the fear of death, which is worse than death itself. He was incapable of making a step toward his companions,

who being at the other end of the ship down below might as well have been on the other side of the world.

Then abruptly he responded to the first impulse—the first God-send inspiration: get to one of the boats and make off!

But it came too late. He saw a form loom up, a gaunt, slender form as if the shadows of one of the spars had picked itself from the deck and assumed a partially human likeness.

Another impulse which came like lightning and gripped him with such immediacy that he could not disobey: A single leap, and the scarecrow went by the board.

Evidently he knew how to dive, for he went down head first instead of jumping. And he may have been an excellent swimmer. But it would have made no difference. In his mental state I rather believe he would have hurled himself into the water anyway.

Dorsey saw the whole episode. He had already emerged from his hiding place when Brass went over.

Running to the rail Dorsey saw the end. He heard a splash as the loose-jointed body hit the water. And he heard a sharp smash against wood as the gunwale of one of the whaleboats struck the man's skull.

The dark form rolled out into the moonlit water like a porpoise hit by the prow of a ship. It rolled under the jet black surface, came up with hands clawing the air, sending out circles of shimmering light, that kept traveling after he went down again.

When they had merged into the distance, the arms appeared once more, and a grotesque head thrust itself above the surface. He was like the spirit of a drowned man arising. It was a picture of the sea giving up its dead at the Day of Judgment.

Dorsey did not wait for him to come up for the last time.

The frantic cry of a girl's voice below decks called him away.

Priscilla's one thought was to get on deck. She did not know how long it would take Dorsey to come below. She knew he was playing a cautious game. She had begged him to.

But as she made an attempt to get to the companionway with her father, Swope came back and met them.

A change had come over the mate. He was like a tiger that had had its first taste of human blood. Having finished his little affair with the doughboy and the negro, he came back to make the final gesture. He seemed crazed with blood lust. His eyes, protruding from the yellow parchment of his face, glowed like two coals.

Blocking the way so that Priscilla and her father could not reach the companionway, he stood, feet wide apart, one bony hand clutching a smoking pistol.

Both the girl and her father saw clearly what was going through his mind. The resolution went across the yellow visage like a grimace, tightening his lips, baring the two buck teeth, reddening with a surge of hot blood.

Skipper Bartlett knew that it was his last chance. One moment more and Swope would have his pistol reloaded. And that would be the end.

With his daughter still clutching his arm—and until now leading his every act—he made a rush, dragging her with him.

He went at the mate like a wild boar.

The mate leaped with the agility of a cat to one side. But a shoulder that was like solid iron smashed against one side of his chest and sent him hurtling to the spirketing.

The mate had not been taken so much by surprise, however, as to lose his gun. He still clutched to it, and scrambling up to a sitting posture, his back against the transverse bulkhead, he fumbled frantically in his pocket and started reloading his pistol.

He was a shapeless-looking thing like a rag doll set up there, with its back against the bulkhead. He did not look

as if he could fight a mouse. But in his hand was the gun—and it took perhaps three seconds to reload it.

The skipper kept on his course, making a bolt for the companionway. His daughter, clinging to him desperately, knew that to ascend that ladder would only mean the same disaster which had overtaken the negro. There was not time.

She cast a desperate glance at Swope, who was sitting against the bulkhead looking up at them with a malevolent grin. The blood-thirsty devil actually had time enough to grin and wait!

It was just then that the skipper stepped on something in his path. He paused abruptly, reached down with his two hands and picked up a gun.

Until now the old man had been in a stupor of resignation. And in these few moments of hectic danger, he did not stop to realize that that gun had already been fired by the negro, and hence was empty. For that matter he might not have detected that the negro had fired at all. There had been two shots, but they sounded almost as one.

Picking the gun up, Bartlett turned to face his enemy, instead of risking the hopeless move of mounting that ladder.

Swope saw the whole thing, and burst into a venomous little chuckle, drawing in his breath and hissing. Swope knew perfectly well that the negro had shot off that gun.

"There's a fine spirit, my bucko!" he laughed. "Ain't runnin' away after all." He still sat there, his thin knees doubled up and his face peering across at them like a gargoyle. "Comin' back to fight like a man! Good! It's what I like.

"Don't want to shoot you down like a forecastle rat. You ain't that. You're an officer. So'm I. Both of us officers and gentlemen. We'll fight man-to-man."

The skipper had thrust his daughter out of his way, and lurched toward the circle of light where Swope was.

Swope stood up, backed away. "A fight at ten paces, eh, skipper?" he shouted with a frenzied sort of bravado. "Ten paces—I'm givin' you your chance—man to man!"

The skipper squeezed the trigger. The hammer snicked.

"What? Not ten paces? Wouldn't wait?" Swope guffawed. "Thought it was man-to-man. Well—anyway—you had first shot. Here goes mine."

The confusing darkness, the wagging flame of the hanging lantern casting sharp shadows like many figures fencing each other, that and the fact that the girl had leaped between them, stayed the murderer's hand for but a fraction of a moment.

He scowled at the two figures struggling in each other's embrace, the daughter offering her own body as a shield to accept the shot; the father frantically trying to shove her out of danger.

Swope scowled, swore, held his gun leveled, peering fiercely into that chaos of shadowy movement.

Then he saw that there were not two presences but three.

A slim gray shadow had dropped down from the companionway door—dropped is the word, for his feet had not touched a single step of the ladder.

Swope was certain that this was the lanky Tom Brass bringing news of an attack.

And then came the voice, laconic and biting:

"I say, what the devil is this—a duel?"

Swope straightened, every fiber of his being tightening in terror. His head bent forward and he stared into the darkness, lowering his brows, like a man facing the red light of sunset.

The skipper and his clinging daughter were thrust aside brusquely enough, the little man almost stumbling on a coil of rope. And instead of the picture of these two—the squat father, the slim daughter, clinging to each other like two helpless children in the dark—

there stood the erect figure of the intruder.

It all happened in a flash of desperate realization. Swope saw the man; he recognized him; and he saw the gun in his hand. And at the same time came the baffling realization that the girl had won.

She had succeeded somehow or other in getting a man on board ship. And she had succeeded in bringing a man for whom Swope from the very first had had a subconscious fear.

Baffled, enraged, terror-stricken, he stood there facing this new enemy—an enemy who was armed with something more than an unloaded gun.

The fact that the girl had picked out this man of all others, a man who had been one of the mutineers, confused Swope all the more. And with the confusion came more terror.

"A duel is it?" Dorsey was saying in the same mordant, biting tones. "A bit of all right. But why duel with a man who is in irons? That's rotten, I'd say. Let's have a real one. Cast off his handcuffs.

"Or else let me take his place. Come on, my gun's on you—but I'll give you time to lift yours. I'll count three, then we both fire. What say?"

Swope took another step backward. His eyes, a moment before blazing with a lust for more blood, had paled now. They were glassy, again assuming their customary resemblance to a carp's. Blobs of sweat came to his yellow forehead.

"One—two—"

"Wait, for pity's sake, wait!" Swope burst out in a shriek. He threw his gun to the deck with a clatter, and then fell to his knees. He crawled, groveling toward Dorsey's boots, reached out and clung to them. "Don't kill me, don't kill me! I'm yours! We'll make a dicker.

"I got money—so much you can't count it. We make an agreement. I'm generous. You came into this game—and you shook my hand. And now you want to shoot me down like the helpless dog that I am."

"I won't do that. Quite impossible. And I dare say it would be better for all concerned if we come to an agreement. First cast off the cuffs from the old flick."

"Sure, pard, I'll cast 'em off," Swope gibbered frantically. "Here's the key. You want him freed; he goes free. He keeps part of the swag—if it's your wish, pard. Here—the key. I'm through with it—through with tormentin' the old lubber. Here, for God's sake, take it. Only give me my life!"

He held it out—as if not daring to get up from his knees.

The girl took it from him, and in a moment had the cuffs off her father's wrist.

Without so much as waiting for an order from his rescuer, the old skipper turned upon his mate, and snapped the cuffs on him.

"There y'are, my bucko mate. Now stand off so's I can kick your guts through your head!"

"Quite all right," Dorsey commented. "We'll let him answer for everything that's happened. Let him be hanged ashore. Why give him a chance to die on the field of honor?"

The mate crumpled, as if his innards had rotted. The skipper could not kick him. It would have been like kicking a decayed pumpkin.

Instead, the stocky little sea dog turned his face upward. Wrinkled and grizzled as that face was, it had softened with a light that comes to devout men when they are communing with God.

"In the name of the Merciful and the Almighty!" he said, looking up into Dorsey's face. "What messenger from Heaven brought you here?"

Dorsey reached for Priscilla's hand, and she bent down and kissed his fervently.

"This is the messenger, skipper," he said.

Two days later the Cape Cod dipped to the swell of the Golden Gate.

Old Joshua, having been liberated from his imprisonment in the hold, had summoned a new crew, more than half of whom were experienced whalemen, and the bark had been stored for a three months' hunt. Beyond the Gate they piled on the canvas till she went bowling down the coast, piling a smother of foam midway up her stem.

Wind and weather made the blood in every man tingle, and the stays and timbers of the old whale ship vibrate as if with a new-found ecstasy.

A marriage was being solemnized on board ship.

The new crew, miners eager to get home whether or not they had found bonanza days in California, made a circle of jovial faces back aft.

Three of them, with banjo, violin and guitar, had just finished a syncopated version of the wedding march. A hymn had been sung. Skipper Bartlett, standing in the center of the ring, adjusted his spectacles and read from the Book.

In front of him stood Priscilla and a tall handsome devil who was in frock coat, flowered vest, broadcloth trousers, and top boots, the bridegroom and the bride.

"We are gathered together here in the sight of God," to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

The canvas bellied, the wind sang jubilantly, the bow wave gurgled a symphony of joy. Sky and sea were the color of a Mexican turquoise.

The voice rang out vibrantly, the little skipper trumpeting the glorious words to the world of glittering blue:

"Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and in health and, forsaking all others, keep thou only unto her so long as you both shall live?"

What a paradise of sea and light! What a radiant girl, holding the hand of Adonis! Two young gods were being married betwixt sea and sky!

"In this holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. If any man can say just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak or else hereafter forever hold his——"

"*Thar she blows!*"

A voice came singing down from the crow's nest aloft.

"Blo-o-o-ws! Blo-o-o-o-ws! Thar blo-o-o-ws! Thar again!"

The skipper cocked an eye over the rim of his spectacles.

"Where away?"

"Two points off the starboard bow! Three of 'em blowin' like the Bulls of Barney! Thar again!"

"Enough of this lubberly nonsense!" the skipper shouted, throwing his Book to the nearest hand. "A dead whale or a stove boat, men! Man the main braces, hoist, and swing!"

And it was not until two days later, when old Skipper Bartlett had chased and stowed down a gam of whales from Point Reyes to Santa Cruz that the solemnization of Priscilla's new estate was perfected.

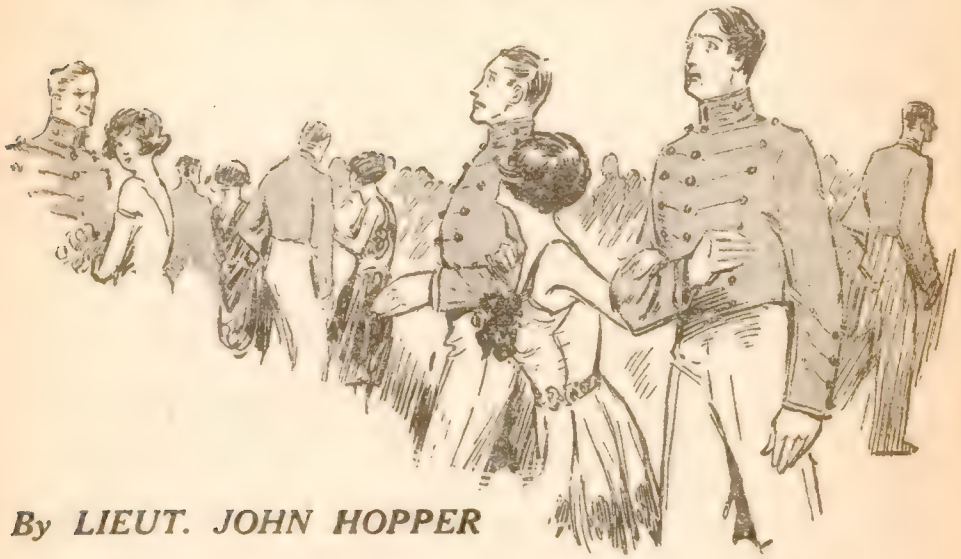
THE END

THE TRAIL'S END

By FLORIA HOWE BRUESS

will be next week's complete novelette. It is a thrilling tale of the Canadian Mounted, involving a mischance which puts the captor at the mercy of his prisoner, and a climax which cannot be guessed in advance.

The West Point Romeos



By LIEUT. JOHN HOPPER

They were used to giving knockouts until they met the girl—and she knocked them both out

"BREAK, you two young hyenas, break! Whatcha tryin' to do, kill each other? Remember, this is only fer fun. Save some of that pep till the reg'lar boxin' season starts."

Jim Duffy, the hard boiled coach of the United States Military Academy boxing squad, wagged his lantern jaw in vain. On a square of canvas surrounded by the usual rope fence, two cadets continued to hammer at each other.

The battle was taking place in the huge, barren boxing room of the massive West Point gymnasium. Around the ring, watching the fight, was a group of husky young men with bare arms and shoulders. Upon these was West Point going to pin her faith in the outcome of the approaching season of intercollegiate boxing.

The fight was getting rough. Jim Duffy clambered. through the ropes He would put an end to this bout.

He approached the punch swapping members of his squad.

"When I tell yez to stop, I want yez to *stop!* Now break, ye devils."

His words fell on unheeding ears. A neat glove skimmed his nose. He was shoved against the ropes.

That was enough for Jim Duffy. He climbed through the ropes again, and joined the spectators.

There was a love light in his eyes.

"Ain't it grand?" he breathed to his squad. "An' they tell me that them two fellas be roommates, too! Ah, I was just like them meself in me younger days. Wouldn't stop fer hell nor high water."

Jim Duffy was right. The two in the ring were roommates.

West Point called them "battling Damon and Pythias." No other two roommates in the Academy had as many fights as did these two. Yet, none were as close in their friendship as they were; Jack Delany, tall, raw-

boned, with red hair and freckled face; Bill Fenton, equally as tall, but with black hair, deep brown eyes, and finely chiseled features.

Their oddities amused the Academy, and endeared them to all hearts.

Their one love was—boxing. During the long boxing season, every afternoon saw them, after the day's classes were done, trotting across Diagonal Walk on the way to the gymnasium.

There they went at it, hammer and tongs. It was a moot question which of the two was the better. They had boxed together for three years and some months, since first their gray was new, and yet the championship was still undecided.

Bill and Jack had another peculiarity in common: they were woman shy.

All West Point knew it. In cadet "B. S. sessions," during long winter evenings in barracks, whenever the subject of Bill and Jack was brought up, two questions went hand in hand: "Which was the better boxer?" and "Wonder if they'll ever fall for any woman?"

Meanwhile, in the ring, the decisive point of the bout had come. Jack Delany made a feint with his left to Bill's head. His right was swinging low for an uppercut.

But the uppercut never reached Bill's well proportioned chin. For, there was a noise like a large, flat block of wood falling on still water. Jack had stopped a fast one with the side of his head.

The freckled legs of Delany gave way slowly. His long, wiry arms groped backward for the ropes.

In an instant Bill Fenton had his roommate in his arms.

"Gee, Jack, I didn't mean to hit you so hard!"

Delany cocked one dizzy blue eye at Bill.

"Don't think about it! If I had started that uppercut a little sooner, you'd be seeing the Milky Way now instead of me."

Bill laughed, and clumsily patted Jack's tan-spotted shoulder with his glove.

"Come on, you two!" broke in coach Jim Duffy. "If yez are going to parade to-night, yez had better get a wiggle on."

II.

FALL. Gray, dismal fall. Wind wrestling crazily with the crackling branches of the trees.

Gray was the color of the long line of men that stretched across the dried, faded grass.

However, there was one splotch of brighter color. In the center of the line.

In that spot were Bill Fenton and Jack Delany. To Bill belonged the honor of supporting the colors of the United States. Jack carried the regimental flag of the United States Corps of Cadets.

"Not many people at parade these days," commented Bill, as the band began augustly to troop the line.

Only first classmen and high ranking second class corporals could talk at parade, and feel safe in so doing.

"Naw," agreed Jack. "It's getting too cold. Wonder when they're going to stop having the darned things?"

"Oh, when the snow gets too deep to wade through," returned Bill cheerfully, while sinking his neck deeper into the great collar of his caped overcoat. "Say, Jack, look at that femme up there on the visitors' benches, the one with the short, gray squirrel coat." Bill became scornful. "Wouldn't you think she'd freeze!"

Long before Bill had called his attention to the girl, Jack had been looking at the trim, crossed legs clad in gray silk.

The girl on the bench appeared well aware of her opportunity. Not many yards in front of her, a thousand pairs of eyes were focused in her direction. And those thousand pairs of eyes belonged to a thousand most eligible young men.

Bill had received no answer to his remark.

"Hey, Jack! See the one I mean?"

Jack returned to earth. His voice sounded almost guilty as he replied:

"Yeh. Isn't it a shame?"

Jack was the weaker of the two roommates. Neither had any scruples against looking at, or commenting upon, pretty girls. But when it came to anything closer than ten feet, they balked.

There were times, however, when Jack had dreams. If he had Bill's good looks—

But who could love a freckled-faced, red-haired cadet, with nothing special to recommend him but an ability to use his fists?

Another voice interrupted Jack's musing and Bill's observations of the girl in the gray fur coat.

"You fellows have got a nerve!"

A second-class color corporal standing beside Bill had spoken.

"That femme you two are so coolly dissecting happens to be the girl I am dragging to the hop to-morrow night."

Buford Hayes, the color corporal raved on:

"Boy, she's some girl, too! Got anything that ever came up the river from New York stopped a mile. Too bad you fellows are such woman haters. I'd give you each a hop with her to-morrow night, if you weren't."

Buford felt perfectly safe in making his magnanimous offer. The two color sergeants rarely went to hops, and when they did, it was to eat, and not to dance.

The roar of the evening gun put an end to further conversation.

The long, gray line presented arms. Even the girl in the squirrel coat stood up.

Slowly and gracefully the flag fluttered down from its high perch atop the tall, white pole. Soon the line swung into column, and began its famous march past the reviewing officers.

As the colors went by, the girl rose gracefully to her feet. Jack, glancing out of a corner of his eye, saw a face that disturbed him.

III.

THE next day was Saturday.

In cadet life, Saturday is the best day of the week. Everything happens then; that is, everything that is fun. Classes are over at noon. Even the terrible weekly inspection, which occurs immediately after lunch, is quickly forgotten in the round of social activities which follows.

Girls came from everywhere. Girls in fur coats, and small, chic hats.

Laughing, bright-eyed, they rested small hands on stalwart gray sleeves, and watched the athletic contests in the gymnasium.

But in the evening—

In the mess hall, supper had just been finished, and the command to rise had been given. Old Grant Hall had housed the cadets at meal times for the greater part of a century. It had seen many Saturday nights. And each Saturday night was the same.

The cares and worries of the past week are forgotten. Morale is high. Animated conversation and spontaneous laughter everywhere.

Through the wide, central door, a turbulent stream of men flowed out into the street, where companies were forming.

Arm in arm, Bill Fenton and Jack Delany were swept along in the crowd. They walked on through the November darkness, feeling their chests expand with the clear, cold air.

Plebes were howling dismally in the streets, exhorted by upper classmen excited by the hugeness of a low hanging, white moon.

There were restless stirrings in Jack Delany's breast. He looked dreamily at the pale moon in the east. In his mind he saw a girl, a girl clad in a short, gray squirrel coat. Crossed legs in gray silk.

He shook his head, as if trying to lose such a vision.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Bill Fenton, finally noticing his roommate's behavior.

"Oh, nothing."

A silence. The two had reached their company, and were awaiting the command to fall in.

"Bill, let's go to the hop to-night?"

Jack paused, and then added apologetically: "It's a feed hop, you know. And we start training for the boxing season next week. So, it will be our last chance to fill up on ice cream and stuff."

"No soap," was Bill's terse comment. "Too darned many girls over there. I like the ice cream and cakes all right, but I get too nervous at the sight of bare arms. You can go if you want to."

"Gee, I'd hate to go without you, Bill," began Jack.

The mere thought that Jack might possibly go without him was enough for Bill. He was well aware that the red head was not as strong in the faith as he might be.

"Don't worry! You're not going without me. Think I'd trust you alone with all those women over in Cullum Hall?"

IV.

Not many hours later, two stags pushed their way through the crowd that edged the refreshment tables in the small ballroom of Cullum Hall. Bill and Jack reached for their first plates of ice cream.

As they ate, they looked around them. The place was comfortably filled with couples, who, having tired of the dancing upstairs, were now refreshing themselves.

It was on the fifth plate of ice cream, when Jack, looking down the red-carpeted hall which led to the marble stairs going to the main ballroom, saw a vision which caused him to hold his spoon suspended halfway to his mouth.

A girl in filmy gray was coming down the stairs. Her red hair was bobbed, and clustered in curls around her small, beautiful head.

It was the face which arrested Jack. The same face that had troubled him since parade. The face of the girl in the gray squirrel coat.

Beside her proudly walked Buford Hayes, the color corporal.

Instantly Jack was seized with chills. He became frightened. He wanted to disappear some place.

To make him feel worse, like creatures of fate, the couple seemed to be advancing straight in his direction.

There was an unholy grin on Buford's face.

"Hi, there, you fellows!" he cried. "Didn't expect to see *you* here. You look like life-savers to me."

Bill had been so busily engaged in securing another plate of ice cream that he had not noticed the couple come up.

He looked up now, startled, abashed. He endeavored, guiltily, to return his sixth plate to the table.

Buford chortled on:

"You're just the fellows I've been looking for. I want you to take care of my girl for me. I've got to go back to barracks for a few minutes."

Jack heard Bill snort under his breath: "Put up job. Won't do it." He hoped the girl didn't hear.

The gay color corporal was not through.

"I knew I could trust you fellows," he went on. "Which is more than I can say about the rest of the keen files who attend the hops nowadays. You can't blame me, can you, with so charming—"

And Buford bowed to the girl in gray, who smiled, and seemed to take his curtsy as her lawful due.

"Well, ta-ta, Red. So long, Bill. See you in a few minutes."

Buford was gone. He left a vast, awkward, embarrassed silence behind him.

Here was a situation which Bill and Jack had dreaded. And, they had been hurled into it headlong, without even a minute's notice. A girl within ten feet!

Her clear gray eyes appraised them. Her mouth was amused, slightly scornful.

As for the roommates, they did not know what to do, or how to act. Bill doggedly kept his head down, and watched one nervous foot scrape back and forth along the polished floor.

Red was in a daze. Here she was! Why, she was *lovely!* But he and Bill were avowed woman haters. All Red could do was stare.

The silence was becoming unbearable.

The girl spoke. Her voice affected one as does a cornet played softly.

"That stupid Buford! He forgot to introduce us. I'm Margy—Margy Gilmore."

There was another silence. Evidently Bill and Jack were amazed that she had a voice, a laugh, and a name.

"Aren't you going to tell me who you are?" she went on.

"Oh, I know what I'm going to call you!" She clapped small, white hands in front of Jack's freckled nose. "You're Red! You couldn't be anything else."

Jack's heart turned a somersault.

By this time Bill had found his voice.

"My name is Fenton—William Fenton," he said almost surlily.

She further dumfounded them by slipping two hands through their reluctant arms.

"Now that we are well acquainted, let's go up and dance."

She had to drag them to start them off. But there was nothing else for them to do. Dance!

V.

STARES and open grins followed the trio down the wide hall, and up the marble stairs.

Indeed, when they reached the big ballroom it seemed to Bill that the music stopped purposely on their arrival in order to let everybody know that the woman-haters had a girl, and were going to dance.

Bill was furious. Here was a fine mess. How could he ever face the world again? He'd be ashamed to step into the boxing ring.

They were waiting for the music to begin.

"Miss Gilmore," articulated Bill desperately, "will you please excuse us a minute?"

She turned a pair of powerful, quizzical eyes upon him.

"Why, certainly! Only don't call me 'Miss Gilmore' any more. Call me Margy."

Bill tried to kill her with a glance, but it did not work. Instead, he dragged the semiconscious Jack to one side.

"Jack, you've got to dance with her," he insisted fiercely.

Poor Red began to tremble afresh.

"I—I can't, Bill. I don't know how to dance. Besides, I don't want to."

Jack did want to, but his nerve was picking daisies.

"All right," said Bill in a voice like that of a judge, "we'll match for it. The loser dances with her, the first dance. If Hayes doesn't come back in time for the second dance, the winner dances with her—and has the first crack at Hayes. Agreed?"

Red nodded humbly.

Solemnly, the two roommates prepared to match in the traditional fashion of the United States Corps of Cadets.

They turned their backs. They shook their right hands in the air. Then they faced each other. One thumb was up. The other down.

Bill stared at the downward pointing thumb of Red. His eyes contracted.

"You always were lucky!" he snorted. "But, remember. Don't you dare

run away while I'm dancing with—with that woman. If Hayes doesn't show up—and you're not here—"

Jack shivered—not in fear of Bill's fists, but at the thought of dancing with *her*.

They returned to the waiting girl in gray. Music began to throb.

Like the brave soldier that he was, Bill placed a determined but awkward arm about the slender waist of Margy. Fascinated, Jack watched them until they were lost in the swirl of dancers.

For the first couple of turns around the great circle, conversation was nonexistent between the two. Bill plowed steadily and decorously along.

A red wisp of scented hair tormented his nose. He made a move to brush it aside. His eye was poor, or his hand was not as steady as it might have been, for he nearly destroyed his partner's smart coiffure.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were deep and dreamy.

"You dance heavenly," she said.

Bill's chin set itself at a sterner angle.

"You're so different from other men," she went on. "You don't talk all the time, and you don't try to tell me how beautiful I am. I adore strong, silent men."

She let her voice die away slowly. Her head drooped until her hair rested snugly against Bill's neck.

Bill began to feel less stern. After all, the girl had some sense. More than most, anyway. And she wasn't half bad looking.

His arm tightened ever so slightly around her waist. It was a smooth, firm waist.

Slight as was the movement, she detected it. She looked up again into his face.

Back of those smoldering gray eyes was something which disturbed Bill. It was something he did not like. It affected him strongly. He dropped his gaze to her lips, and was startled by the fullness and the redness of them.

Suddenly the music ceased.

Bill had done his duty. He was all for rushing her into a corner and delivering her into Jack's hands. But she demurred.

"Please. Let's go out on the balcony for a breath of air."

The balcony was crowded. Couples were hugging the darker corners. Occasionally, when a match was struck for a cigarette, it showed the gleaming brass buttons of some gray sleeve around fair shoulders.

Bill steered Margy to a place on the balcony rail which was fully illuminated by light from the doorway. He was taking no chances.

Together, in silence, they watched the white moon put silver into the black waters of the Hudson far below them.

Once she turned quickly around, and caught him gazing at her.

"Tell me," she asked in a voice that was low and vibrant, "why do you hate us women so?"

Bill was at a loss for words. The perfume of her was choking him.

She leaned forward. Her face was close to his.

"Do you—hate *me?*"

Bill tried to back away. He couldn't. He was hypnotized, rooted to the spot. Those red lips—

Somehow, her small hand was on his shoulder. It was stealing around to the back of his neck. The lips were so close. They should not be so close, he kept telling himself.

He felt himself going. Something within him cried out.

When he came to, she was laughing, and he had a funny taste in his mouth. It was his first experience with lipstick.

VI.

Bill was the last one in after the hop. As he entered the room which he shared with Jack, he turned on the light. Barren, gray walls, two steel desks, two fan-back wooden chairs, two small white cots.

He stood looking at the sleeping form of his roommate.

He wondered how Jack had fared with Margy. For Jack had had to dance with her, too.

As if in answer to his wonder, his eyes fell upon a scrap of paper on Jack's desk.

Bill picked it up. He read:

Miss Margy Gilmore,
15907 Park Avenue,
New York.

The address was written in Jack's scrawly handwriting.

Slowly, Bill pulled a similar scrap of paper from the inner band of his cap. He compared the two bits of paper. Same address.

It was a sober Bill who snapped out the light, and got into bed. Had Jack been ensnared on the balcony, too? Had those red lips—

In his bed, Bill turned restlessly. Jack must never know that he, Bill Fenton, the invincible woman hater, had fallen. Then, Bill rolled over into a new thought. If Jack had fallen, too—

What a mess, what a mess for two alleged woman haters!

The next day was Sunday.

Sunday at West Point is apt to be a very long, and a very boring day unless the cadet is fortunate enough to be dragging a very beautiful and vivacious young lady.

If the cadet has no such lady guest, then his day is spent in reading the Sunday newspapers, writing letters, or taking long walks through the lovely highlands of the Hudson.

After reveille that morning, Jack and Bill, with last night's sleep still heavy on their faces, returned to their room.

As they entered, Jack noticed on his table the slip of paper which contained Margy's address. A shadow of worry crossed his face. He looked at Bill, who was unconcernedly going about his preparations for shaving.

A sleight of hand movement, and the paper was swept out of sight into the desk drawer. Jack breathed easier. Bill must never know.

Brass-voiced, first call for breakfast sounded outside in the area of barracks: "Soupy-soupy-soup. Come-and-get-your-soup."

Clamorous bells rang in the hallways. Four bells—four minutes to the assembly. Three bells. Sounds of many feet running along the halls. They belonged to plebes on their way to ranks.

These fourth classmen must be in their places two minutes before the bugle sounds assembly. This is the old custom, so that upper classmen, dashing into ranks on the last note of assembly, might more easily find their proper positions in the formation.

Two bells—two minutes to assembly.

Bill was donning his blouse and cap.

The indifferent, red-headed Jack, who never made a formation without rushing most violently the last few minutes, dashed into the room with his face still flecked with lather from shaving.

The source of water was out in the hall. And the hall sink served all the rooms on the floor. There was a washstand, with bowls, in each room, but cadets never used it. Rather, they would crowd around the hall sink, elbowing each other to get at the water. Thus, the washstands were kept immaculate for the rigorous inspections.

One long bell—one minute to assembly.

Jack flew into his gray blouse. Bill was going out the door. A scrap of paper fluttered from his cap. He did not notice its fall.

But Jack did. However, he was in too much of a hurry to call out to his roommate.

Jack started for the door. There was the scrap of paper.

Something prompted him to pick it

up. The seconds were flying. Assembly was due to be blown any instant.

Still, Jack delayed, the paper in his hand. He read:

Miss Margy Gilmore
15907 Park Avenue
New York.

The address was written in Bill's clear, heavy hand.

Slowly, the paper fluttered from Jack's fingers.

When he rushed into the line of file closers of his company, which was formed in the wide area, he found that he had already been reported absent from breakfast formation.

At breakfast, Bill and Jack were unusually silent.

Bill, being the senior in rank, was seated at the head of the table. On his left sat Jack. Across from Jack, on Bill's right, sat another first classman. The rest of the cadets were arranged in order of rank.

Next to the first classmen were seated the second classmen. Still lower down sat the yearlings. And, at the lowest and lowliest of places were the plebes, very stiff and straight in their chairs, daring not to speak or move except when necessary.

Table talk was slow until the first classman across from Jack remembered the hop of the evening before.

A fire of razz and laughter was directed at the woman haters from every upper classman at the table. Even the plebes risked a few smiles.

Bill and Jack sank deeper into their chairs. They had fallen from their pedestals. They were idols with feet of most ordinary clay. Yet, according to the upper classmen, all would not have been so bad if only they had not committed that most heinous crime of stealing another man's girl.

Jack's freckled face took on a hue which matched his red hair. Bill was silent, morose, smiling only enough to keep up his reputation as a good sport.

After breakfast, they were glad to get back to their room. It seemed as if the whole Corps of Cadets had heard of their fall from grace. Every one they had met that morning had asked them about the "little vamp with the red hair." Some, indeed, had had the effrontery to demand when they were going to have her up to West Point again.

"Say, Jack, what are you going to do to-day?" asked Bill, in the safety of their room.

The reply was made in studious carelessness.

"Oh, I guess I'll write a letter or two before I do anything else."

Bill swung his leg nervously back and forth as he sat on the edge of his green-topped desk. It was unusual for the energetic Jack to sit indoors and write letters on a bright sunny morning.

Bill did not approve. Besides, he wanted to write letters himself. In fact, *a* letter to a particular person named—Margy. And, it wouldn't do at all for Jack to have the slightest suspicion that such a letter was being written.

At the same time, Jack was wishing that Bill himself would go off for a walk some place. There was an important letter to be written. He had promised her—

But Bill seemed to have no inclination to go for a walk, so Jack started in to write:

West Point, N. Y., Nov 30, 19—.

Dear Margy—

He stopped to consider for awhile. The end of his pen was in his mouth.

Would he dare to pour out his soul to her? Did she like romance and love? Or would she think him a darned fool? It was hard to be romantic with Bill sitting there across from him.

He began again. He decided that romance was best.

I approach this letter trembling at the thoughts of you like a horse trembles at the touch of his master's hand.

I have not been myself since I first looked into your eyes last night.

Yes, it must have been Fate that brought us together, because, before you entered my life, I never even looked at a woman.

I wish I could believe all the things you said to me out on the balcony. I will believe them if you will come up to West Point to see me next Saturday. Will you?

J—

An interruption. Bill was growling about something. Jack looked up. His eyes met those of his roommate guiltily.

"I've been talking to you for the last ten minutes," grumbled Bill. "That must be a mighty important letter you're writing."

Jack flushed.

Bill went on:

"You haven't seen a little piece of paper around here, have you?"

Jack started to ask what kind of paper, and then he remembered the scrap that fell from Bill's cap earlier in the morning.

"I think there's a piece on the floor over here. Maybe that's what you want."

Bill walked over and picked it up.

"Have you seen what is on this?" he demanded suspiciously of Jack.

Jack thought quickly. Should he admit having seen the address on the paper? To do so would cause Bill to lose face. For what right had he to be in possession of a lady's address?

And again, Bill might get mad and say something unpleasant. The good-natured Red disliked family quarrels.

"No," he lied.

Bill seemed to be relieved, and returned to his desk.

The room was silent, save for the scratching of the two pens.

Bill's letter was much less romantic than Red's. It ran:

West Point, N. Y., Nov. 30, 19—.

DEAR MARGY:

Concerning the matter we discussed last Saturday night out on the balcony:

Yes, I would be glad to have you come up to see me this coming Saturday.

It is unusual for me to drag any girl, but you are different from the rest.

Please let me know if you will come.

As ever,

BILL FENTON.

Both men finished their letters at about the same time. Then came the business of addressing and stamping envelopes.

They were through. They looked up. Their eyes met across the tables.

No more letters were written that day. And, for the first time since they had known each other, "Damon and Pythias" spent the Sunday not in each other's company.

VII.

THE academic week followed. Days of study, classes, and drill.

Bill and Jack attended boxing practice in the gymnasium regularly. But they avoided bouts with each other.

The academy noticed and marveled. The cadets sought a reason. Apparently there was none to be had. No one dreamed to put the cause at Margy's door. The idea that Bill and Jack would fall out because of a woman was unthinkable.

And yet the two roommates were twitted about their escapade at the hop. The corps took it as a huge joke, and saw nothing serious behind it.

Relations in the Fenton-Delany "house" on the second floor of the Fifteenth Division of Barracks were becoming strained indeed.

The roommates had lost that atmosphere of confidence that had once existed between them. They got so that they hesitated even to speak to each other.

Jack's heart was wrung. He loved Bill, loved him more than he would a brother.

Bill suffered, too. He missed Jack's cheerfulness, his good-natured fellowship.

On Thursday the climax broke with suddenness and fury.

That day they had reëstablished somewhat their old-time feelings. Margy had not been heard from, and her memory had been subdued by the events of full days.

They were returning to quarters, arm in arm, after the three o'clock class.

When they reached the door of their room, they paused for an instant. There, on Jack's table, which was nearer the door, two yellow envelopes stared up at them.

Telegrams! From her!

Impatiently they both rushed forward. Each picked up an envelope and tore it open.

Jack read:

> Be delighted to attend the hop with you Saturday. See you at the hotel in time for dinner. MARGY.

Bill read:

> Be delighted to attend the hop with you Saturday. See you at the hotel in time for dinner. MARGY.

Bill was the first to discover the horrible error. He looked at the telegram address, and saw

> CADET JACK DELANY,
> Co. A, West Point, N. Y.

"I believe you have the wrong telegram," he said icily to Jack, who was, at that moment, in the seventh heaven.

For an instant Jack looked bewildered. Then he stared at the address typed on his telegram. It was for Bill!

They exchanged telegrams, each not knowing what to expect. Each feared that Margy had accepted the other fellow's invitation, and refused his own. In silence they read their own telegrams.

They read and reread. The silence was prolonged. Why, the telegrams were identically the same!

She had promised each that she would come up to West Point this coming Saturday.

But she couldn't go to the hop with both of them! It had to be one or the other.

Bill was the first to recover his equilibrium.

"Well," he snapped at Jack, "what are you going to do about it?"

"'—do about it?'" repeated Jack vacantly, amazed at the nasty tone in which Bill had spoken. "I—I dunno. Drag her, I suppose. She says here that she will meet me at dinner Saturday night."

"That's what she says in my telegram, too. Didn't you read it? She's going to the hop with me. There must be a mistake somewhere, but any fool would know that I am the one she means. I danced with her first."

Jack was extremely good-natured—up to a certain point. Then his red hair blew the safety valve to pieces.

"Now, listen here, Bill. I know that Margy intends to come up here with me. She told me so out on the balcony last Saturday night. And—I give you fair warning—if she comes up, she'll be with me."

"Like hell she will! I don't want to have any trouble with you, Delany. We've been roommates too long for that. But you keep away from Margy Gilmore *this* Saturday. If you don't, I won't be responsible for consequences."

That was too much red flag in front of Jack's nose.

"Bill Fenton, I can lick you every day of every week you're born. So don't try any of that stuff."

Bill sneered.

"You haven't shown it over in the gym."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it, I'll give you a chance to back up your statements, and decide the question of Margy at the same time.

"As you are aware, I suppose, there is going to be a boxing meet in the gym this Saturday. It's going to be an open meet, and any pair who wishes to put on a bout can do so.

"Get the idea? We'll put on a bout. Nobody will think it unusual. And the winner takes Margy. What do you say?"

"Done!" snapped Bill grimly.

VIII.

SATURDAY afternoon.

The great main room of the gymnasium was comfortably filled. In the center of the floor was a high platform, which contained the boxing ring.

Along one of the longer sides of the room, tiers of seats had been erected. This stand was now a solid mass of gray: the cadets, talking and laughing, awaiting the boxing to begin.

Jim Duffy, coach of the Academy boxing squad, was announcer and referee.

Clad in white ducks and white shirt, he climbed through the ropes, and stood in the center of the ring.

He announced the first bout. It was between a couple of plebes.

Good-naturedly, and tolerantly, the cadets watched the bouts. Most of them were displays of boxing skill, with very little actual fighting. A few had more blood and less skill.

But every one was waiting for the event of the afternoon, the bout between "Damon and Pythias."

Bill and Jack always put on a good fight, despite the fact that they were roommates.

Finally they were announced.

"In this corner we have Fenton, first-class. Handsomest man in the Corps of Cadets," said Coach Duffy through his nose.

The spectators howled with glee.

"And in this corner we have his roommate, 'Red Jack' Delany.

"Time, gentlemen."

On the bell, Bill and Jack bounded from their corners, and shook hands.

The fight for Margy was on.

Carefully they measured each other. This was to be a real fight. Winner take Margy.

In the first round Bill was the aggressor. He kept treading on Jack's toes.

Something seemed to be holding Jack back. Time and again he would start out to light into Bill, but would wind up by covering himself, or going into a clinch.

The second round was better. Bill had succeeded in landing a fast one square on Jack's sensitive, freckled nose. That made Jack mad, so they mixed it up considerably.

The cadet observers were delighted. The more punches that were swapped, the better they liked the fight. They split pretty evenly for favorites. As many cheers and shouts of encouragement were heard for Bill as for Jack.

By the middle of the second round every one in that great room knew that he was watching a real fight—a fight for blood—a fight to the bitter end.

Excitement kept increasing. Cadets were more serious in their cheering, and more intense in their encouragement.

In the ring, Coach Jim Duffy was talking to himself. He, above all men, knew that here was a fight. And his old warrior blood made him as much a part of it as the contestants.

Now and then he would call out under his breath: "Go it, yez devils. The best man of yez wins."

The second round was nearing its end.

Bill decided that then was the best time to get Jack. He began a furious assault. Jack's guard availed him little before that terrific rain of blows.

His back was tight against the ropes. Every time he tried to get away, he was driven back by Bill's flying, heavy fists.

Bill delivered a smashing stomach blow with his left hand, and then drove upward with his right.

The watching crowd held its breath in sympathy for Jack.

Jack seemed to waver on his feet. He tried to pull himself together, to

get out of the way of the terrible punishment Bill was giving him.

Bill came in again. This time it was a left hook to the jaw. Jack's head went back with a snap that was heard all over the gym.

He sank to the floor.

Jim Duffy began to count.

"One-two-three-four—"

Jack tried to get up, and fell back to the canvas again.

Duffy droned on.

"Five-six-seven—"

Dimly through the haze, Jack heard the numbers. A saucy face, framed with red, curly hair flashed through his brain. He must get up. She was expecting him.

He raised himself on his hands. He saw Bill, in his corner, looking at him with curious eyes.

"Eight-nine—"

"Br-r-r-r—" the bell interrupted.

The round was over! The fight had not yet been won. The bell saved the day for Jack.

The crowd settled back in its seats once more. The strained look came off every face.

Jack was brought to his corner. Seconds worked on him. He rested, head back on the ropes.

The third round began more soberly. Bill had used up an immense amount of energy in his furious attacks on Jack in the second round.

Jack himself was tired, but he felt his strength returning to him every second.

All at once they mixed. A couple of wild wildcats could not have done any better. All the punches known to the science of boxing were released.

The end happened so suddenly that its rapidity and unusualness left everybody stunned, silent and wide-eyed in their seats.

Red dashed his fist, with all his strength, to the point of Bill's chin. At the same instant Bill's fist sought, and found, Red's solar plexus.

Both men went down in a heap.

Duffy stood over them and began counting.

"One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine—"

He hesitated, as if uncertain whether to go on. Then:

"Ten."

The grizzled coach scratched his woolly gray head.

"Well—I'll be damned!" he exploded. "Them two roommates niver will decide which be the better man."

A cadet, with a red sash across his gray clad shoulder, another one around his waist from which depended a glittering sword, dashed to the platform. He was the cadet officer of the day, and the official deliverer of telegrams.

He waved two yellow envelopes in the air.

In the ring, the seconds were busily trying to revive the two roommates. Finally, one of them noticed the O. D.

"Who are they for?" he called.

"For Fenton and Delany," replied the O. D. as he handed the messages through the ropes.

The mention of telegrams seemed to have a marvelous effect on Bill and Jack. Almost together, they came to, sat up dizzily.

The telegrams were handed to them. Each opened, and read:

> Won't be able to come up this weekend. Congratulate me. Was married to a naval officer yesterday.
>
> MARGY.

For a whole minute the roommates stared at the yellow slips in their hands.

Then they looked at each other. Their split and swollen faces endeavored to display sheepish grins.

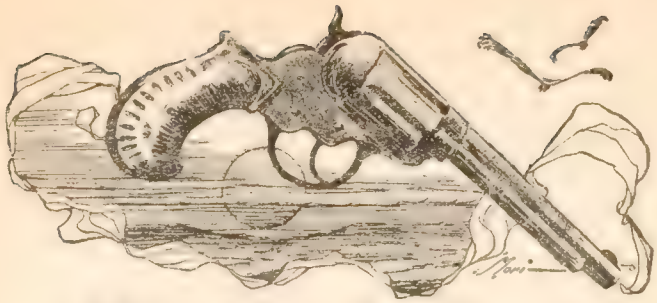
They were still sitting on the floor, within a foot of each other.

Bill extended his hand.

"Never again," he croaked through cracked lips.

"Amen," said Jack.

THE END



Notched Guns

By JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

Stage coach companions who anticipated trouble and the surprising fashion in which it was met at the end

"I AM particularly interested in the fauna and flora of this vast, untrammeled empire, especially that which is indigenous."

A slender little man with mild blue eyes peering benignly through steel-rimmed spectacles, fixed his gaze upon his companion on the back seat of the Trinidad stage, now lurching into the Pecos Valley. Wisps of graying hair peeked out from beneath his low-crowned, wide-brimmed black hat, while mutton-chop whiskers of the same shade stole down his cheek.

"Say, professor, would you mind dealing that there hand again? I ain't much on foreign languages except a little Mexican and a few words of Apache."

"How extraordinary!" murmured the first speaker. "Ah—I have it. You have seen my monograph on the paleozoic strata in western Missouri, the one which had my portrait on the cover. That's it—isn't it?"

A puzzled look in sharp gray eyes, an expression of utter inability to understand.

"How did you know I was a professor?"

"It's a gift, stranger—just a gift. Says I to myself when you got in up there at Trinidad—says I— that hombre is an hombre who rides herd on words. Long horn words, not just runty things that has had a tough winter on the range, but corn-fed long horns raring to go. I don't know your name, stranger, but—"

"Pardon me—I should have introduced myself. I am Professor Alfred Darley. And you?"

"Who, me? Oh, just call me Donald, Hal Donald—that's all."

Laughter, which had been flashing in the sharp gray eyes, fled and, for a moment, a flicker of suspicion shone, as his gaze was held upon the older man. Then they were smiling once more, twinkling mischievously like a small boy planning a prank on his elders.

A jolt of unusual violence as the stage struck a deep rut. A muttered curse from a muscular, bronzed giant who lay on the seat opposite them, sprawling athwart the cushions, enjoying a midday siesta. Once more the stage glided over smooth roads and the snores of the sleeper were resumed.

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Donald"—Professor Darley left off his study of the slumbering giant—"I trust our trip will be most pleasant. To me it is filled with constantly intriguing wonders. It is my first venture

into this great West of which I have read with so much avidity. It seems hardly believable that we have left civilization behind and are in the wild, uncurbed regions where men carry deadly weapons as unconcernedly as though they were palm-leaf fans or cotton umbrellas."

The little man paused, his eyes fixed upon the heavy navy revolvers strapped to the form of the slumbering giant.

"Is he—do you think—er—our fellow traveler—would you call him a—a bad man?" he asked in an almost frightened whisper.

A grin from Hal Donald as he rolled a cigarette.

"He looks kind of hostile, but you can't tell," he answered in guarded tones, "but I aim to find out. He looks something like an hombre I've got my eye peeled for—if he is, just watch the fireworks."

A puzzled expression came into the professor's mild blue eyes. For a moment he seemed to be studying the words just spoken. Then a beneficent smile chased away a frown and he fairly beamed upon Hal Donald.

"Ah—I understand your picturesque metaphor now. You are a sheriff, one of those fearless souls who protect the weak against the predatory elements which—"

"Hold on, professor. You got me to milling now, ready to stampede. If you mean I am an hombre who takes care of bad men—you're hitting the bull right in the eye. Taking care of bad men is my game from hock to soda. When I get through taking care of a bad man, he's good—that's all."

"Reformed, you mean?"

"Well—I wouldn't exactly say reformed. Still you might put it that there way. He certainly ain't the same shape as when I started in on him. More ventilated, you might say—more sunshine looking into him."

"More sunshine in his soul. Ah—I understand." The professor was beaming with interest.

"No—I don't reckon I'd say his soul, either. Hardly that. I don't have much to do with souls except set 'em free, but I sure can make a bad man be good."

"You sway them then?" asked the professor.

"Sway them—I push 'em over."

"You must tell me of your experiences, Mr. Donald. I am greatly interested in the uplifting forces of our great West. I want to know how they meet the many problems confronting them. Do you think, for instance," here the professor's voice was lowered, "that you could sway our friend there?"

He gestured to the sleeping figure on the other side of the coach.

"Easy—I don't care if he has got a flock of notches in his gun."

"Notches? In his gun?" Here the mild blue eyes peered anxiously at the sleeper's weapons. Upon the grip of one was a series of indentations, deeply filed.

"Goodness—he has—hasn't he?" An inquiring look came through the steel-rimmed spectacles. "Is there any—er—significance to—er—notches?"

A smile of amusement flashed across Hal Donald's well-tanned features, a smile at the professor's childish candor. It was seldom a man of this type came into the Pecos Valley and the young man was enjoying the situation to its fullest.

He had heard of tenderfeet greener than the bay tree, but here was one who exceeded the most far-fetched stories of the range.

"Them notches are tombstones, professor," he replied. "They mean men killed. That hombre is a killer if there ever was one—either that or he's a four-flusher who's issuing invitations to his own funeral. I mean to find out."

"Goodness me!" Professor Darley seemed to shrink an inch in height. "Do you mean we're—we're riding with a murderer?"

"I wouldn't say murderer. We don't use that word a whole heap out here. Of course, when you get a gent with a whole flock of dents in his six-guns, there's liable to be one or two irregular killings in the lot. Still—you shouldn't say murderer—that ain't a nice word west of Kansas City."

A shudder of horror appeared to be coursing up and down the professor's spine and his unusually mild blue eyes were fixed upon their fellow passenger.

"I wonder what—what he's doing here?" Darley whispered.

"There's a lot of gold on this stage," said Hal Donald, "a heap of it. That's why they got a guard up on the box with old man Kelly. That's why I'm riding here. Not taking any chances."

"Oh—" the professor's eyes were round with interest. "Tell me about it."

"Well—Pedro Maxwell sold five thousand head of beef steers and demanded gold. The bank is—"

"All out for chow," boomed a voice as the stage came to a halt with shrieking brakes.

Professor Alfred Darley looked out to see a little station house around which were built a number of barns, stage sheds and other outbuildings of similar type. He alighted stiffly, stretching his thin legs as he walked toward the eating house. He looked around to see Hal Donald following.

"You know—I've been thinking," he said, when the young man had caught up with him, "that perhaps we should appraise the authorities that a desperate man is riding as a passenger in their treasure coach—"

"Just you leave that hombre to me, professor," the other broke in, "I just eat them tin horns alive. Personally, I reckon he's a road agent, but still—you can't tell."

"A road agent? You mean an employee of the stage line?"

"I mean a bad man, a robber, a highwayman—he's the hombre I'm looking for or I'm a horned toad."

"Then don't you think it would be better to arrest him and thus avoid bloodshed?"

"We don't do things that way out here. If you arrested every hombre that might do something wrong, they wouldn't be enough folks outside the jails to hold a round-up. You just leave this maverick to me. If I need any help—I'll ask you."

Donald's laughing eyes were sober now. A flinty light shone in their cool depths.

"Will you?" Eagerness sounded in the professor's tone. "Goodness gracious—I never—still—I shall be delighted to be of any assistance. What can we do?"

Hal Donald glanced around to see their huge traveling companion clambering out of the stage.

"We can't do anything—now," he said, "but wait until this afternoon and I'll show you. That hombre ain't going to have me for a notch on his shooting iron. Not me. He'll probably go to sleep again after dinner. It's hot down there in the valley and while he's snoring, we'll fix him up so he won't be quite so pizen."

"How?" The professor's usually placid face was alive with excitement.

Another quick glance around. Then in a thick whisper:

"We'll sneak those six-guns of his and when I get through with them, he'll be as harmless as a baby."

"Ah—a prophylactic measure."

"I don't know if it's as bad as all that, but a dead six-gun sure takes the sting out of that kind of rattler."

During the dinner, Hal Donald continued to keep his eyes upon the dark giant, who had slept through the morning on the front seat.

Professor Darley, however, continued eating, serenely ignorant of the tensing situation.

"I was right—he is a road agent," Donald whispered, as he joined the older man in the station house yard. "What's more—he's got a hunch I'm

on his trail. If we're going to do anything—we'll have to do it mighty soon."

"If I can aid—"

The professor stopped. From the other side of the yard came the sound of voices raised in altercation. Plainly their huge fellow passenger was in an argument with old man Kelly, the stage driver.

"Drive a nail at twenty paces! He can't do it—not from the hip," they heard the big man bellow.

"Say, look here, stranger," shouted Kelly. "You don't need to think just because you are from San Antone that you can lay it over us boys."

"Don't you 'stranger' me. My name's Titus Coulter and I got money to say he can't do it."

"Let's see what the ruction's about," Hal Donald whispered.

"Do you think it safe—safe with a man of that type—at large?" was the frightened question.

"Just leave it to me—I eat tough hombres—alive."

They edged into the circle of men gathered about Titus Coulter and old man Kelly. The big man was vociferous in his declaration that neither the driver nor his guard could drive a nail at twenty paces with a six-gun.

"You've got to show me," he bellowed. "You Pecos boys may think you can shoot, but my money says you can't."

He strode across the yard to fix three nails in the heavy oaken corner post of the empty horse corral.

"I've got a nice pretty little gold piece for every one you drive—from the hip," he told the stage guard, when he had returned to the circle. "Money talks—now let's hear that old six-gun of yours answer it."

"Go to it, Bob. Take his money," urged Kelly, the driver.

Gingerly the man stepped forward. A flash, as the sunlight struck the polished surface of his revolver. Three shots rang out in swift succession and the weapon was slipped back into its holster.

Titus Coulter crossed the open space to examine the target.

"Here's ten for the one you drove," he said with a grin, handing the guard a gold piece. "I didn't think you could do it—not from the hip. I still got twenty dollars and there's two nails left if any of you gents feel lucky."

"I don't mind taking a sucker's money," Donald spoke in soft tones. "Show me the cash."

Twin gold pieces were held aloft.

"Oh, Mr. ——" Professor Darley's hand reached out to touch Donald's arm.

Before he could voice his words, a weapon had leaped from nowhere and two shots rang out.

"Pay me," said Hal Donald.

His gray eyes were cold, their laughter gone. His mouth unsmiling. A slit in his well-tanned face.

"Well—I'll be dog-goned," Titus Coulter looked at the corral post twenty yards away. "Gosh-all-fish-hooks—now that's what I call shooting. Two of them—bing-bing—just like that. Let me look at that shooting iron of yours, stranger."

"I just reckon I'll keep my hands on this six-gun, mister." Donald's gaze was held upon the other in cold appraisal. "Don't believe in letting my gat go wandering."

He turned to see Professor Darley wiping the dust from his steel-rimmed spectacles, a comical expression of bewilderment in his mild blue eyes.

"My goodness me," he was muttering. "That was—was extraordinary. You must tell me more about yourself, Mr. Donald. I have never seen such a wonderful display of muscular coordination. What a perfectly marvelous weapon that must be, sir! In the interest of science I should like to examine it. I understand, of course, your distaste for trusting it to strangers, but—"

He hesitated as Hal Donald scanned

his features. The young man's solemn gaze bored deep in that fleeting second. Then the serious expression relaxed and a smile bared smooth, white teeth.

His hand reached to his breast to draw forth a weapon. He did not carry it at his side like Titus Coulter, but in a spring-faced scabbard beneath the left arm. Apparently he had been unarmed when Coulter's taunt had brought the weapon into flaming action.

"Sure—you can look at it, professor," he said.

The older man's fingers toyed with the gleaming thing, his eyes twinkling as they studied it, widening with surprise as they noted an array of notches running down the grip.

"Isn't it amazing," he mumbled, "and just think—how you shoot. I must write a monograph upon the Western man, his skill and superhuman speed, stressing the coördination of mind, eyes, and digital muscles."

Now his attention was directed to deeply filled notches.

"What a remarkable number of marks you have," he pointed out. "Quite a few more than Mr. Coulter. These, I should imagine, mark the—er—passing of noted outlaws, desperadoes, criminals you have been forced to—er—dispatch while protecting the innocent."

A grim smile crossed Hal Donald's thin lips.

"Something like that," he answered. "There ain't any hombres in that there list that don't deserve to be there, and some mighty bad men has got their monuments on that shooting iron."

"Of course—of course." Here the professor beamed upon his companion. "I know, Mr. Donald, in this wild, almost uncivilized community, an officer has to mete out justice with his own hand."

Darley continued to toy with the six-shooter, apparently loath to part with it. He spun the cylinder and peered down into the loaded chambers.

"My—my—" he muttered. "What an extraordinary weapon. And its history— I shall have to write—"

"All aboard, you folks," bawled old man Kelly from the stage box. "We have wasted too much time already. Got to be hustling."

"Quite so—quite so." Darley grudgingly surrendered the revolver to Hal Donald. "Coming—instantly. Come, Mr. Donald, they are waiting on us."

He took the young man's arm, and the two walked toward the stage, speaking in subdued tones.

"Do you really believe Mr. Coulter is—er—a road agent?" the professor asked.

"Sure—I know it—now."

"Really! How?" The steel-rimmed spectacles only partially concealed the interest-filled blue eyes.

"Didn't you see what his game was?" Donald asked in lowered tone. "He was working to see if Bob, old man Kelly's guard, was quick on the draw and how he shot. Pretty slick—the way he worked that. He wanted to find out what kind of shooting he was up against. He knows now, I reckon."

"Do you suppose"—Darley's voice fell to a husky whisper—"do you imagine he suspects you are an officer of the law trailing him, following him to his destruction? Do you suppose he has the slightest inkling?"

"He inkles something, professor, or he wouldn't have played that gun trick. He wasn't throwing thirty dollars into the air just to see how far he could chuck it. It's our move. We've got to do something."

"You mean, fix his guns—like you said?"

The professor's voice was lowered like that of some conspirator planning a dark, desperate deed.

"*Seguro*—we'll wait until—"

"Hurry up, you folks," bawled old man Kelly. "We ain't got all day and night both. Climb in there if you are going on this stage."

Soon the coach was rolling its sway-

ing way down into the Pecos Valley. Once more Titus Coulter stretched himself on the wide front seat, tilting his sombrero across his nose that his eyes might be shaded from the light streaming in the side windows.

A glance was exchanged between the two who sat opposite him, but no words were spoken. Gradually the big man's head drooped until his square chin rested on his breast.

Next they heard his measured breathing, and noted the rise and fall of the knotted neckerchief resting on his colorful shirt. They began to speak in whispers, forming the final details of their plan to disarm the bad man.

"Now?" Professor Darley glanced toward Hal Donald.

"Wait a minute." The gray eyes were looking furtively around as if they suspected unseen passengers in the treasure coach.

Another interval, in which they continued to hold their glances on the sleeper, now snoring lustily. A light touch on the arm, and the professor looked around. The boyish grin had deserted his lips, now thin as a knife blade with determination.

"All right?" whispered Darley.

Donald nodded.

Carefully Darley laid aside the small leather handbag he had held in his lap. A lurch and a half dive by the swaying coach slid it to the floor, a jingle coming from its depth.

Hal Donald bent hastily to pick it up.

"Gosh—heavy for a little thing!" he muttered; then, as the cold, gray eyes were held upon the professor: "You must be carrying quite a little dinero yourself."

"Oh, not much—mostly silver." A flush of annoyance swept the kindly face. Then, with a gesture toward the sleeping form: "I was afraid it would wake him up."

Mumbling his thanks, he took the handbag to place it on the other side of the back seat. Then he arose, balancing himself carefully, and bent over the outstretched sleeper.

"Now?" The twinkling blue eyes peered anxiously through the steel-rimmed glasses.

Another nod.

Professor Darley's hand gently lifted one of Coulter's heavy weapons from its holster and placed it in Donald's lap. The work of putting the weapon out of action was both swift and deft.

Coulter's well notched gun was as effectively emasculated as though its bullets had been removed.

It was returned in the same careful manner and its mate abstracted from its holster to go through the same operation.

"Goodness me!" murmured the professor when he had resumed his seat beside Donald. "What if he had awakened? I'm all in a twitter."

"What if the rabbit had stopped to shave when the coyote was after him?" laughed the young man in return. "You don't need to worry about him now. He won't do any shooting. Not with those guns. And the beauty of it is, he won't suspect anything until he draws. If we had taken the shells out, he might have noticed it, but this way, he'll be cold meat if he starts anything."

Professor Darley took off his spectacles to wipe a microscopic fleck of dust from their lenses. His gaze was fixed upon the now grim features of his companion.

Hal Donald had changed greatly in the last few miles. Plainly he was tensing himself for the climax of the drama he was playing.

"I hope—I hope I've done nothing that will get you into any trouble," Darley whispered.

"Listen, professor, I fatten on trouble. That big hombre won't bring me any wrinkles. Not when I've got Betsy with me."

His hand rested on the weapon he carried under his arm.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "I almost forgot to reload this—"

"Oh, Mr. Donald!"

The sudden exclamation caused the young man to slip his weapon back into its holster. The professor's hand had gripped his arm, and the spectacled eyes looked into his with an expression akin to terror.

"What's the matter?"

"Didn't you see?" He glanced toward the outsprawled form of Titus Coulter. "He's getting ready to—to do something."

"Do something? Say, what do you mean?" This in an angry whisper.

Coulter was stirring uneasily. Now he was lifting his hat and gazing sleepily around. With a yawn he sat up, staring stupidly at one, then the other. His hands dropped to his weapons, but the touch of their grips seemed to reassure him.

Then he glanced out the window at the dusty countryside.

"Getting along toward sundown," muttered the big man. "Gosh—funny, isn't it—how time lopes along when you are pounding your ear? Don't seem more than five minutes since we had dinner."

An interval of silence. Now the professor began to look out of the window. It was nearing evening and the road was dipping down through a narrow defile, the sheer walls of a cañon rising on either side.

The song of the Chisholm trail no longer sounded from the driver's seat, and old man Kelly was lashing his horses to the full gallop in spite of the precipitous trail.

A sudden tenseness seemed to grip the coach.

"Our driver seems to be in a frightful hurry," remarked Professor Darley. "Isn't it rather dangerous, driving like this along a winding road?"

"We're just getting into Box Cañon," Hal Donald explained. "That is where some road agents stuck up the stage last week, and Kelly don't want another helping from that dish. Not when he's got all that gold aboard. That's why he's got a guard riding with him."

"A guard ain't going to do a heap of good when trouble comes from a direction he ain't looking," was Titus Coulter's contribution to the conversation.

A flash in Donald's gray eyes as they were held upon the big man.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Just that—that's all," was the lazy answer; and Coulter sank back on his cushions once more.

Professor Darley's attention was held upon the young man beside him. He sensed the growing tenseness as the coach careened along, and the actions of his fellow passengers seemed to tell him big events were impending.

They might cover their tautness with elaborate nonchalance, but he could see it in the actions of both.

"We are like passengers on a treasure ship, sailing through the Spanish Main," he said. "Pirates may come down upon us any minute, flying the Jolly Roger. Wouldn't it be exciting if we were held up?"

"Yes—wouldn't it?" Donald's lips smiled, but his eyes did not. "Especially if the pirates had somebody on board who was working for them."

Darley's spectacles seemed to flash a glance toward Titus Coulter. No sign from the heavy figure, now apparently sleeping once more.

"Do you think—" He nodded across the coach.

"That's just what I do think," Hal answered. "But he won't catch me asleep in the saddle. When I start, Betsy will be smoking."

"Gracious!" exclaimed the professor.

Now the stage was dashing through the cañon's bed at breakneck speed. It pitched and jolted until Titus Coulter sat up, damning a driver who had no

consideration for the comfort of his passengers.

"I just don't seem to be able to get enough sleep these days," he grumbled as he rolled a cigarette. "Seems to me they could let a body get forty winks once in awhile."

An exchange of glances on the other side of the coach. Hal Donald winked gravely and a smile covered the face of the professor.

"Maybe you'll get some rest—later," the young man suggested. "Body who's always wanting to lay down—might get stretched out, you know."

"What do you mean by that?" Coulter's hands were on his guns.

"Just that. That's all."

"Listen, gentlemen, listen." The professor had raised a staying hand, as though to becalm belligerent companions.

A sudden pitching and jolting of the coach as it came to an abrupt halt. Professor Darley and Hal Donald were thrown forward, almost into Titus Coulter's lap. Then came revolver shots from outside and commands shouted by strange voices.

The crack of a rifle from above, and a groan as somebody near the coach was struck by well directed fire.

Titus Coulter leaped to his feet at the sound of the first explosion.

His hands were on his six-guns, and—

"Dog-gone it," he muttered, "I reckon something has happened!"

"Oh, my goodness me!" shrilled the professor. "Oh, my sakes alive!"

He snatched up his little handbag and was staring wildly about.

"Stick 'em up—'way up high! If you even look as though you wanted to shoot, I'll drill you clean."

Hal Donald, his gray eyes flashing, shoved a weapon against Titus Coulter's breast. The big man looked down, contempt written in every feature.

"What you trying to do, young feller?" he demanded.

"You'll see, if you don't stick 'em up."

The gray eyes were cold now, cold as icebergs when the sun's rays fall helplessly upon their gleaming surfaces.

They were the eyes the West had come to know as "killers' eyes." Billy the Kid, Wild Bill Hickock and other desperadoes of that day were men with eyes like that.

"Just what do you aim to do?" Coulter demanded, his glance meeting that of the young man.

Outside more shots were ringing and lurid oaths urged the bandits to charge the stage. Professor Darley was struggling desperately with his small black handbag.

"I'll kill you, you—"

Donald's teeth were clenched as he uttered the words.

A grim smile came across the big man's face, a smile which showed no fear. Then he glanced once more into the gray eyes of the man whose gun was pressed against his heart.

"What's the matter, Don?" he asked. "Lost your nerve? You used to shoot and talk afterward. Don't you want another notch in that prize shooting iron of yours? I thought you were collecting them. Hal Donald. That's good. Anybody would know that you're Don Halton. Get to your shooting, you yellow pup!"

A flash as the little man's thumb flew back.

A sharp click as the hammer of the weapon fell upon an empty cartridge. A look of utter surprise in the drawn face.

His trusted gun had failed.

Before his gun could snap another time Coulter had snatched a six-shooter from beneath his own armpit and shoved it into the other's mouth.

"Drop that gat!" he commanded.

Donald's revolver fell to the floor of the stage.

"Put your hands behind you," Coulter ordered.

A click of steel as the man's arms were held back.

"Why, you dirty, low-livered—" The young man's gray eyes were blazing now as he realized the trap into which he had fallen.

"I think I'd put 'em on his legs, too," Coulter spoke over the prisoner's shoulder. "He's a slippery cuss."

Another snap of steel.

"Say, listen to me—" Don's face was white with rage.

"I'll listen to you later, Halton," said Titus Coulter. "I ain't got time. Too much to do—outside there."

He leaped through the door, and the firing redoubled in volume. Cries, shouts, imprecations filled the air. Then silence swept down with all the suddenness of a detonation.

"Tie 'em all—hand and feet." Coulter's command came through the open stage door. "Here's some more rope—give them plenty."

His hands and feet held with steel bands, Hal Donald turned on Professor Darley as the sounds of battle died. In his glance was new and deadly hatred.

He had been tricked. Vengefully he appraised the older man, who sat serenely opposite him, a small derringer in either hand.

"So you and that big stiff are the road agents?" Donald demanded. "You played the tenderfoot, and he was the sucker we disarmed. Pretty slick. You let me fix your pal so I thought he couldn't shoot, and all the time he had another gun.

"Then you fixed my gun—spun the cylinder so I had blanks to fire on, and when I started to reload you talked me out of it. You're good. I'll say that. Say, professor, just who are you, anyhow?"

The blue eyes behind the steel-rimmed glasses were twinkling as he laid down one of his derringers, well out of Don's reach. Then he took a card from the black handbag, a handbag which had held jingling gyves instead of silver.

"Got them all, Titus?" he called out of the stage door before he turned to his captive.

"Every one of them, hog tied and snarling," was the laughing reply.

"You see, Donald," Professor Darley addressed the young man, "we were looking after this shipment of gold, and knew that you were liable to be wanting it. We didn't know you by sight, but some one said you packed a well notched gun and were overproud of your shooting. Hence the little play in the stage station yard.

"We spotted you when we got off the train at Trinidad, and knew we were going to have you as a fellow passenger, so we just played a little game. You were looking for a man with well notched guns, so Coulter filed a nice collection of them just to attract your attention from mine."

The young man's eyes widened as a weapon filled with notches on both sides came into view from beneath the professor's left arm.

"But I must congratulate you, Donald, on your attempt to pass yourself off as a sheriff when you were the real leader of the road agents. That wasn't bad. It had a smack of originality in it. In the old days, when I rode range myself, you would have fooled me completely. Since then—I've had experience."

The benign blue eyes were laughing now through the steel-rimmed spectacles.

"But who—who in the dickens are you?" the young man demanded.

Carefully Darley held the card before the prisoner's eyes that he might read. Upon it was a short, revealing legend.

PROF. ALFRED DARLEY
(Criminologist)
Prinkerton Detective Agency, Kansas City, Mo.

THE END

Rork and Beans

By THOMAS THURSDAY

In which is set forth the fact that what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, to say nothing of the parrot

HONEST, good people, I've seen worse than this in the movies, and when it comes to true stories, I'll match it against the best of 'em. In case you don't know what I'm talking about, as Coolidge remarked to the puzzled voters, I'll make the clean breast of matters at once.

Speaking of love, romance and goo of that ilk, I happened to be a bird's-eye witness of the nifty affair that transpired between "Salty" Rork, "Bandy" Baldwin, Queen Bess, and the smarty of the fourth part, M. le Beans. But don't sprint away with the notion that Beans is an inmate of dear old Boston; as the matter and fact, Beans was discovered in the land of the South Sea Islands, and played the part of a hook-nosed parrot.

By the odd coincidence, that's exactly what he was! That being understood, kick the cat off the lounge, settle back comfortable, and tune in on the tattle of the century.

For the benefit of the late comers, I'm "Doc" McKeezick and, at the time this flock of fla-fla took place, I was managing the side-show with Ike Sullivan's Wild West Rodeo and Freak Hippodrome. After showing to various slabs in Arizona and New Mexico, we hopped up to Montana and South Dakota with the noble objects of playing a series of three-day stands.

It was while we annoyed a cactus-and-dust burg named Rio Bloomer that Salty Rork skidded into view. Me and "Side-Trap" Simpkins were sitting on the bally-stand, trying to figure which part of the West was golden, when we spot a strange, odd and curious gil, gaping at the banners like they was painted by Rembrandt and Bud Fisher.

He's as tan as ten weeks at Miami Beach, whilst perched upon his shoulder is a pip of a parrot who's amusing one and all via some maritime wisecracks.

"Gangway!" squawks the bird, "what craft is that?"

"By the Great Horn Spoon!" adds the sailor, getting a slant at the banner depicting the Fattest Girl Ever Born to Live.

"What's Davy Jones doing so far

away from his locker?" demands Side-Trap.

The sea dog walks over, ejects a stream of tobacco juice against a newly-painted ticket-box, and looks as serious as a complete set of smallpox.

"Mates," he says, "how's chances of signing up with this land-lubbering outfit?"

"What's the matter with the deep-sea stuff?" I asked.

"Prob'bly all wet," gloops Side-Trap, a born diplomat.

This crack goes over the skull of the sailor like the sunshine over Los Angeles.

"Salty Rork and his pal are now shifting to the land for a spell," goes on the mariner. "We been rocking over the high seas for nigh seven years, come July. Can't you use a good swab guy around this rigging?"

"Shiver my slats!" remarks the parrot.

"Gosh," says Side-Trap, "that pelican can talk."

"Just as plain as you," admits Salty.

"Thanks," bowed Side-Trap.

"Speaking of Moby Dick," I says, "how'd you get so far inland?"

"Easy," replies Salty. "I ships aboard a slow-freight out of Seattle, bound for Chicago, but a nosey train lad spots me and heaves me anchor overboard."

"Well, to put some pepper in a Salty story, I sign up Mr. Rork and Beans to do some "grinding" in front of the show. In case you think a grinder is a guy who sharpens knives, saws, and lawn-mowers, let it be known that the same is a leather-lunged gent who paces up and down in front of the show, asking the folks without to come within.

"What do I grind?" demands Salty, unwise to the trouper's lingo.

"Just grind 'em in," explains Side-Trap.

"Hell's bells," moans Salty. "I ain't no auto mechanic. I'm a sailor!"

I give Side-Trap the office to lay off the kidding and explain the gaff.

"Listen, Captain Kidd," I says. "All your new portfolio calls for is for you to walk up and down in front of this bally-stand, and do a little barking. You see—"

"Barking?" yelps the lad. "What d'yer take me for, a St. Bernard?"

"You don't understand the gimmick," I explains. "A grinder and a barker, in the delightful patois of the outdoor show world, is the same. Now, seeing that you are about to try your luck at the game, I'll give you a few stock sentences to yelp into the ears of the 'monkeys.'"

"Monkeys?" demands the Scissorbill. "I ain't working in no cage, and you can lay to that!"

"Nothing like it," I says. "The monkeys are nothing more than the towners, or natives; in short, the good folks who cough up the jack to see the show."

"Whither away!" says Salty.

"As I was about to remark," I goes on, "all you'll have to do is to strut up and down, with Beans on your shoulder and say, 'Nev-ah out and nev-ah ovah! Once seen nev-ah forgotten! The sight of a lifetime! Strange, odd and curious pee-pul from all parts of the world!' D'ye get me? Then, if such a fortunate thing shouldst happen that the folks begin to jam the box offices, you keep repeating, 'One at a time, boys; one at a time!' That's all there is, there ain't any more."

"I can do that from stem to stern," beams Salty. "What ho, Beans?"

"Pipe down, mate," says Beans, and so that was all settled.

Our next stop was laboring under the name of Stiffs Cañon, and Salty turns out to be a first-class grinder. Of course, I could of got much better lads than him, but the fact that he strutted his stuff with M. Beans on his shoulder was a ballyhoo by itself.

Shortly before we closed the date, Salty comes loping up to me, all agog.

"Strike me pink!" he explodes. "What d'yer think?"

"I'll bite," says Side-Trap, "what?"

"Listen to Beans!" enthuses Salty. "Ahoy, there, Beans—ship us some langwidge!"

"Nev-ah out and nev-ah ovah!" squawks Beans, flapping his wings. "Once seen nev-ah forgotten! *One at a time, boys; one at a time!* Shiver my slats!"

"Great!" I says.

"From stem to stern," admits Salty. "And say, mate, if Beans is willing to talk, why should I?"

"You shouldn't," I says, tickled silly at the new idea in grinding. "What's more, if you can keep that bird talking I'll boost your wages five more bucks per weekly."

Just as I had supposed, Beans's chatter attracted more attention than any ten human grinders, even if they yelped their lungs out. Even old man Sullivan, the big guy, strolls up, gets a lobeful of Beans's forensics, and wiggles his goatee with pleasure.

"That's showmanship!" enthuses Mr. Sullivan. "Er—what is it?"

"What did yer think it was?" whinnies Salty, "a ape?"

"I wasn't asking about you," snaps the old man, and goes humming down the lot.

Some time during the next two stands, Salty Rork gets well acquainted with Bandy Baldwin, one of my ticket-sellers. I had picked up Bandy a few weeks previous, down in the land of New Mexico, where he had rode a wicked range.

He had joined the show in much the same frame of mind as Salty, claiming that he was plumb tired of steers, and didn't crave to see any more, unless they was sliced, broiled and smothered in onions. So when I dangled twenty smackers per weekly in front of young Bandy he collapsed into the job.

How the so ever, just what Bandy found so interesting in Salty, and the vice and the versa, is a puzzle to me, as Sam Lloyd was heard to remark. Be that as it may, as time and Lindbergh flew, they became closer than an eel and his skin, and after they had known each other a couple or three weeks, they shared one another's ties, socks, hats, B. V. D.'s, or what have you?

Enter now Queen Bess, the Albino Beauty, the gal that Ziegfeld passed up, because he didn't see her. Bess had plenty of "It," and although four out of five have it we ain't mentioning pyorrhea.

She had more curves than a scenic railway, the skin you love to touch and, speaking of that schoolgirl complexion, she had Miss America looking like Topsy in Mr. Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Well, lads and lassies, any time things are the wee bit too quiet around the vicinity just tote in a appetizing blonde, and permit a sailor and a cowboy to look her over. If you can't get action after that, call the marines!

No fooling, just as soon as Queen Bess displayed her pulchritude before them two umpchays, trouble swarmed in like mice into a corncrib. And when it was all over, like freckles on a Georgia crackers' pan, a parrot yclept Beans was knocked for a set of baboon teething-rings. Stick around and see!

II.

Our next attempt to loot the public was at a hard-riding and soft-thinking burg named Mourner, South Dakota. Up to this period, Bandy and Salty are getting along like goldfish and bowls.

Before the kid-show opened for the day, they'd stroll down the main stem of the town, arm in arm, happy as a rabbit in a cabbage patch.

It was about this time that I got the first intimation that Bandy was taking more than a four per cent interest in Queen Bess. Ten minutes before we gave the first bally-hoo, Bandy struts up with a five-pound box of candy in his hand.

"Where to with the toothache promoters?" I asked.

"For the sweetest gal in the world," he says. "It's shore a pleasure to give candy to Bess."

He struts in and, shortly after, comes out. Later the same day, whilst off for his chow, he arrives with a bevy of flowers, and performs the same act. This stuff attracts the attention of M. Rork, don't think it didn't!

"Wot's me mate doing with the stink weeds?" inquired Salty.

"Presenting them with his compliments to his lady love," says Side-Trap.

"Well, strike me pink!" exploded Salty, and, with Beans on his shoulder, goes to work.

Of course, at the time, as the cuckoo remarked to the clock, I had no idea what was on the sea dog's mind, and his actions was a mystery to me. How the so ever, one thing seemed as plain as a twenty-dollar gold piece at a convention of bums, to wit and i. e., Mr. Rork did *not* care to have his playmate share affections with any fee-male.

After we closed that night I asked Side-Trap's opinion. That mad mullah had opinions on everything, and I don't mean he just thinks so.

"That's as easy to figure as two-times-two on a adding machine," says he. "The seagoing umpchay thinks Bandy is the berries, and he's afraid his friendship will be wrecked on the reef of love. Believe me, Doc, Danny Cupid has wrecked more things than flivver drivers!"

Our next spot—or, in English, play-stand—was entitled Champ Haven, a flourishing hive of assorted homo-boobiens; and for the first time since Salty and Bandy had been chumming together, Salty arrives on the grounds alone.

As he neared the bally-stand, I noted a worried look on his pan.

"Ahoy, kid!" greets Side-Trap. "Why all the crape?"

"Is Queen Bess in?" he wants to know. "By the Pink Toed Prophet, I'm going right in and have a gab with her!"

"Be nice, Salty," I cautions, figuring the dizzy wave-hopper intended to bawl out Bess for flirting with Bandy. "Remembah all things come to he who hates."

"Whither away!" he snorts. "I have something to say to her, and you can lay to that!"

He rushes in, and, a few moments after, dashes out with his face as red as a three-alarm fire.

"Avast, sailor!" kids Side-Trap. "What weather on the sea?"

"None o' your land-lubberin' business!" he snaps, and legs down the lot.

Well, good people, figuring there was something in the air besides the radio, I rushed into the tent with the noble objects of interviewing Bess.

"What's the little game between you and M. le Rork?" I inquires with the greatest of nonchalance.

"Ask me another," she says. "He just came in, talked in everything but English, then flushed and rushed out. All I could understand were the words 'Bandy Baldwin.' Have you any idea what's on his mind, if he happens to have one?"

"You been flirting with Bandy lately?" I demands.

This steams up m'lady plenty.

"Well, I love that!" she flares. "Do *you* happen to be my keeper? The idea!"

"Not interested," I says. "I got a bride, philosopher and friend of my own. One's company, but two is a shroud. How the so ever, if you love Bandy and Bandy loves you—"

Not so good. Promptly after I duck a mean coffee cup, scramble away, and tell Side-Trap what has befell me.

"You're a very bright boy," he sniffs. "I have heard of water on the brain, but I guess you must have Lake Erie on yours."

"Be your years," I says, the bit huffed. "I'm the manager of this show, remembah."

"Does that make me a Odd Fellow?" parries Mr. Simpkins. "In the meantime, Doc, I'll put you jerry to the real McCoy between Bandy, Salty, and why the two gentlemen prefer a blonde."

Before unwrapping the plot, Side-Trap spears a stogy out of my vest pocket, strikes a match down my spinal column, then squats comfortable on the bally-stand.

"What," he begins, "dyer know about love?"

"What," I counters, "does *any*body know about love?"

"Love," goes on Side-Trap, "is the stuff that dreams are made of."

"You blurbing about nightmares?"

"As to the case of Messrs. Bandy and Salty, *both* have collapsed over the charms of Bess, which means the fun is about to begin."

"D'yer suppose that Bess is wise to the rivalry?" I wish to know.

"D'yer suppose that Tunney knew Dempsey was in the ring during the seventh round?" hoots Simpkins. "Love, big boy, is a ladies' dish, and don't kid yourselves about that! If Bess ain't aware that Bandy and Salty are heels over head in love with her, then she is waiting for some one to tell her she's a blonde. A guy thinks he has selected the gal he wishes to marry, but, believe me, Cupid, the gal has selected him first."

"Which means Bess is prob'ly playing one clown against the other, hey?"

"That's quite the exactly," agrees Side-Trap. "Bandy and Salty are heading into some frosty weather. I bet it busts up their friendship like bricks through a paper hoop. Love and war are twins."

To lower a tall story, Side-Trap's analysis proved to be as correct as frost on a Eskimo's whiskers!

III.

THE first smash-up between Bandy and Salty took place at our next stand —in round numbers, Snifterville. I found Salty sitting alone in the lobby of the Hotel Escope, with Beans perched upon his shoulder, and he looked a shade madder than a sparrow biting into a lead worm.

Presently Bandy swoops down the stairs, spots Salty, and walks up briskly.

"Hey, pardner!" he snaps. "What's yore idea in wearing muh best socks?"

"Whither away!" snorts Salty. "Half of them socks is mine, and you can lay to that! Didn't I pay for my share?"

"Yeah," admits Bandy, "but yore wearing both of 'em!"

"Ain't I got two legs? Take a dive in Davy Jones for yourself!"

"I'll take a dive at yore beak!" blusters Bandy.

"Shut up," steams Salty, "or I'll stand you on your beam ends!"

"One at a time, boys; one at a time!" squarks Beans.

"From now on you and me are quits!" goes on Bandy. "We hire different rooms to park in, and I shore mean it!"

"Quit, by thunder, quit!" snorts Salty, pounding the arms of his chair. "And you can lay—"

"Nev-ah out and nev-ah ovah!" remarks Beans.

Possible rioting was prevented by the sudden appearance of Queen Bess. Dressed a bit better than a whole bevy of movie queens, she trips into the lobby escorted by a gil who could easily pass as the King of Sheiks. Besides having It, he also possessed pearl-gray spats, cane, movie-hero kelly, and the latest in House-of-Hokumheimer suits.

Passing up both Salty and Bandy like they had triple diphtheria, she sails up to me, with a goaling smile.

"Doc," she says, "I want you to meet Joe Striker. Joe, this is Mr. McKeezick, who attempts to manage our show."

"Greetings," I says. "How's things breaking?"

"Really, old man," he returns, "I'm not engaged in business."

"Out of a job, hey?" I goes on. "Well, if you ain't tuned-in on regular coffee and cake money, I couldst use a extry canvasman around the show. This pays thirty bucks the monthly, and the privilege of killing your appetite at the grease-joint."

"Thanks awfully," grins this boy scout, "but to tell the truth, old man, I'm not open for any engagements. You see, dad has a dime for every chink in Mongolia, so what would you?"

"I wouldn't," I says, even as you and I.

After a few more minutes of exchanging Whistler wit and wisdom, they stroll away. It was then that I got a slant at the pans of Salty and Bandy. Speaking of a pair of cent-a-piece valentines, you should of seen them!

"Say!" blurts Salty, turning to Bandy, "who's that clam? One o' them land-lubberin' dandies, and you can lay to that!"

"Shore is, pardner," replied Bandy. Then, encircling his arm around Salty, he says: "Wimmen are prime funny, huh? Er les' take a stroll around the town!"

For the most part of the next day, Joe Striker hung around Bess like cluck mine-promoters around a sucker-list. Whether or not Mr. Striker was the scion of a wealthy pater, you can search me, as the pickpocket says to the cop.

But just between us, as the ham remarked to the sandwich, it was none of my business. A kid-show manager has troubles of his own, don't fool yourself about that!

How the so ever, I did feel the wee trifle sorry for them two dumb-gongs, the cow-chasing Bandy and the sea-going Salty. But as a matter of facts, them Scissor-bills had as much chance of making Queen Bess as I have of wedding Cleopatra.

Well, speaking of Cupid, and other baloney, the Signor Striker disappeared as suddenly as he had arrived. When I questioned Bess about her new boy friend, she tells me that he was just a old school chum and—would it be possible for me to mind my own business?

Several days later, whilst we showed a town with the suggestive name of Hanghigh, Salty and Bandy got to sparring again. In fact, just as soon as they were sure that Joe Striker had departed hence, both began playing for the attention of Bess.

Far as I was concerned, I was hoping that either one or the other beezark wouldst cop the cutey, which same would give me some peace. You have no idea, ladies and gents, how love can mar the even tenor of a side-show's ways!

The second day at Hanghigh I discovered a new twist to Salty Rork. My hotel room adjoined his, and the partition was as thin as a bootlegger's alibi. Honest, a married lad would have a hell of a time keeping the family battle wholly within the family.

Anyways, after we had sloughed for the day, Bandy takes a stroll around town, whilst Salty sneaks up to the room. I happen to retire the wee bit early myself, otherwise I would not of been let in on the comedy of the century.

Although Salty and Bandy still roomed together they got along like arsenic on tripe. When the show closed for the day, Bandy went one way and Salty the other. No fooling, from the way they picked on one another, a stranger would think they were married!

Well, to return to our bone, as Fido remarked, I was about to reel off a cruel snore, when I was aroused by the voice of Salty via the partition.

"Beans, old boy," says the sailor, "you and me have been through fair weather and foul. And, I ask you, ain't Salty always give you the best hard-tack, and everythin'? Answer me that, you son-of-a-squarker!"

"One at a time, boys," said Beans, "one at a time!"

"Avast with that!" snorts Salty. "I'm going to larn you a new piece to speak. You see, Salty's in love, and he ain't got the guts to tell his lady love about it. Now, list your ears to starboard."

I hop out of bed, land on a tack, then cock a ear close to the partition.

"Now listen," goes on Salty, "I want you to say, 'Bess, Salty thinks you are a wonderful gal, and he would like to marry you.' D'yer hear me? Come on, say it, you slab-sided funnel!"

Well, he keeps it up for near a hour, and then he heard Bandy strutting down the corridor. He douses the light, and I could hear him hop into bed, and give a good imitation of snoring.

Bandy must of took a header over a rug or something and banged his nut against the bed, all of which starts him off on a war dance of words. For a full fifteen minutes, he and Salty pass a few censored remarks, then fin'ly collapse into the arms of Morpheus.

The next night, Salty puts Beans through his new lesson, and the bird proves to be a apt pupil. Now and then he would bust forth with, "One at a time, boys; one at a time!" but in the end he would wind up with, "Bess, Salty thinks you are a wonderful gal, and he would like to marry you."

"Good old bird!" enthuses Salty. "You and me are still shipmates, strike me pink, if we ain't! If you win the hand of Bess for me, I'll buy you all the crackers in the world. Now, say it again, old bird, say it again!"

As the hobo remarked about Jack Rockefeller, he was rich! Of course, I kept the secret to myself, not even letting Side-Trap Simpkins in on the farce. If he got wind of it, he would prob'bly spill the beans all over Boston.

All the same, even if he *had* heard of it, the riot couldn't of been worse than it actually was! Talk about the frame-up of the century—well, you'll find the complete results in the last chapter.

IV.

THE exhibition platform of Queen Bess was at the left side, rear, right next to the dressing-room, which same was partitioned with a canvas drop curtain. She was usually the first of the attractions to get down to business, if any, all of which Salty Rork seemed to be aware of.

Anyway, Salty plants himself behind the bally-stand, until he saw Bess enter the show, and a moment after, he follows, with Beans perched on his shoulder.

Not wishing to miss the big blow-off, I sneaks in behind the sailor, at a safe distance. Unobserved by Bess, who has mounted her platform, Salty walks into the dressing tent, and prepares to pull off his *pièce de résistance,* whatever that is.

Concealing myself behind another platform, I didn't have long to wait for the odd demonstration of what love can do when it's working strong in a guy's bosom. Suddenly, I see Beans come fluttering over the partition, tossed by Salty, and land on the platform of Bess. Naturally, Bess blinks a couple or three times, wondering what it was all about.

"Why, hello, Beans!" exclaims Bess. "What on earth are you doing here?"

And what d'yer suppose that fool parrot replies? Hot coffee, listen to this:

"Bess," squarks Beans, "Salty thinks you are *not* a beautiful gal, and he *wouldn't* like to marry you!"

Don't faint—there's more to come.

Whilst Bess let out a whinny of rage, Salty dashes out from the dressing room with blood and assorted thunder dripping from his tongue. His eyes shot fire, his hair stood straight up, while his mouth was all but foaming.

"Strike me pink!" yelps Salty, pick-

ing up a guy stake and going after Beans. "By the Great Horn Spoon! Strike me—"

With a couple or three squarks, Mr. Beans flaps his wings, takes a scared peck at his master, then races down the sawdust aisle, followed by Salty. As Beans squarked through the marquée, Side-Trap Simpkins was about to enter and the hasty parrot stuck a claw in Side-Trap's whiskers.

"What the—" begins Side-Trap, throwing up both hands.

Down the lot races Beans, and down the lot goes Salty. I watched 'em until both was out of sight, and even then Beans was still one lap ahead of Mr. Rork.

I haven't seen Salty since, and I know he never caught Beans.

Meanwhile I rush back into the tent to see what Bess had on her mind. Reaching the bally-stand, I bump into Bandy Baldwin, and that baby is grinning from ear to here.

"Ape," I says politely, "what's so funny to you?"

"Mebbe I didn't put one ovah on Shorty!" he explodes. "They ain't no salt watah bird going to get ahead of Bandy!"

That is all shorthand, code and static to me.

"Besides the sand fleas," I says, "what's biting you? Come clean, you cow-chaser, or I'll tap you one on the kisser! I got to hop in and square things with Bess, or she'll blow the show. *Say* something, stupid!"

"Haw, haw!" cackles the lad. "Did you-all heah what Beans says? Hot stuff, hey? I hope to tell yuh!"

I grab up a six-foot stake, spat on my hands, and make arrangements to do some damage. The noble gesture causes the steer-slammer to calm down considerable.

"Hold it, pardner!" he begs. "I just hadda laugh at Salty, honest. He spends a whole week teaching Beans how to say, 'Bess, Salty thinks you are a beautiful girl, and he would like to marry you.' But did he say it? Hell, no! I got wise to Salty's game, and when he was out I taught Beans how to change a few words in the sentence. I shore put one ovah on Salty, hey?"

"What a fine set of chilblains *you* turned out to be!" I snorts, not approving of such tricks. "D'yer call that a fair way to treat your gal? And do you think that such tactics is going to plant you solid with Bess?"

"It shore will," he says. "Just leave her to me, pardner. I ain't none of them bashful sailor chaps, like Salty. No, sir; I'm gointa go right in now and propose to Bess."

At this juncture the marquée shivers and out raves Bess, madder than a goldfish in a bird cage.

"Where's that idiotic sailor?" she whoops. "To think that I should be insulted in such a manner! Oh, I think I'm going to cry!"

Bandy steps boldly forward and attempts to encircle her in his arms.

"Don't you cry, honey," soothes the gil. "I'll take care of you—for life!"

Bess draws back, looks over Bandy and explodes a little bomb of her own.

"So *you'll* protect me!" she steams. "How nice! Listen to me, you dizzy chump, you haven't sense enough to protect yourself. Besides, if there's any protecting to be done, I'm sure my own husband can take care of the matter!"

This is news to me, as the reporter remarked, after hearing about the man who bit the dog. No kidding, I never knew the lady *had* a husband, did you?

"Er—speaking of husbands," I says, cautiously, "just who d'yer mean?"

"I mean," she snaps, "Mr. Joe Striker. We were married a week ago, last Tuesday. What's more, I'm leaving this gypsy outfit flat at the end of the week. See if you can get a laugh out of that!"

Bandy, back to the steers! Salty, back to the waves!

Meanwhile, hold your seats—Beans is about to broadcast his farewell squark.

My room at the hotel was in the rear, and looked out upon a cornfield. With the next day's dawn came a racket that resembled a large part of the Whirled War.

I was about to dream of bigger and better profits, when my dream was knocked bowlegged by a flock of shrieking crows. Hopping out of bed at least five hours ahead of my usual time, I peer out the window and note the following tableau:

Atop a rock line-fence stood Beans, flapping wings and tongue with assorted fury. Encircling him was six black crows, who seemed to have but one thought in mind, viz., to treat Mr. Beans to a taste of old style pugeylism.

As I looked on, spellbound, three crows made a charge of the Fight Brigade, and gave Beans a few nifty belts on his kisser with their wings, legs, or what have they.

He knocked two crows as cold as Mr. Zero's grandpop, all of which seems to tickle him silly.

"Nev-ah out and nev-ah ovah!" he remarks, giving one and all a wicked smile.

Whilst the two crows were enjoying a snappy course in astronomy, the other four pals came up and made a concerted attack upon the scrappy parrot. With feathers fluffed like the fur on a mad cat's back, Mons. Beans began to sock away for dear life. Down goes another crow, making a score of three to nothing, favoring Beans.

Meantime, the remaining three cornswipers, enraged at what had befell their little playmates, dashed at Beans from all sides, causing the parrot to pivot like a merry-go-round.

Then the third crow makes a swandive onto the parrot's neck, and begins to peck away like it was feeding time. This annoys Beans quite the little, don't think it didn't!

"Once seen, nev-ah forgotten!" yelps Beans, at the same upsetting a crow on his ear.

Whilst the second three birds were battling Beans, the punch-drunk trio returned from slumberland, after which the whole six drew off for a consultation. After plenty of cawing, the six decided on a new plan of battle, and then the riot begins!

For a few moments, the mêlée was all to the Verdun. Feathers to the right, feathers to the left, feathers to the middle!

"The sight of a lifetime!" squarks Beans, doing his stuff.

Soon the entire crow family became peeved more than plenty and decide to make the fighting parrot kiss the canvas. Three attacked from the rear and three attacked from the front.

With a rush, they swooped down upon Beans, upset him like a tramp dog does an ashcan, then piled all over him. It was now or never!

With his back to the ground, and feet in the air, Beans put up the real Battle of the Century, and for much less than a million bucks.

He catches one crow with his left leg, and tosses him high over the stone fence; he socks a second with his other leg, and knocks him for a loop; he jabs away at a third with his beak, and makes him caw for help. How the so ever, six against one, my countrymen, is six against one!

Fighting to the last dig and scratch, the last drop of spirit within him, the noble Beans squarks his final battle cry:

"*One at a time, boys; one at a time!*"

THE END

The seventeenth successful guess on the authorship of "Eyes West!" out of 318 submitted to date—March 16—was made by Robert Bryan, of Toledo, Ohio.

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